

SUCCESS IS REQUIRED: THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH ACHIEVING
BLACK MALE FOOTBALL PLAYERS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
DIVISION I INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTH

by

BRANDON WILLIAM JONES

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Acknowledgments

“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all of your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

Proverbs 3:5 (NASB)

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Abstract

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Brandon William Jones, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2015

Supervising Professor: Ifeoma Amah

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of high-achieving Black male football players at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South. A qualitative research design was utilized. Participants were five Black male football players who were starters or important reserve players, had a 3.0 or higher GPA, and were at their respective institutions for at least a year prior to interviewing.

Data were obtained through five individual, semi-structured, and face-to-face interviews at two sites—Eastern Valley State University (EVSU) and Coastal Plains University (CPU). Transcripts were then professionally transcribed, read through (line by line) for a sense of the whole, and analyzed for themes. Themes were then presented the themes, along with verbatim quotes from interview transcripts, to a phenomenological research group. The themes that emerged were:

- “That’s What Keeps Me Going”: Motivation to succeed and be a high-achiever

- “It’s Harder Than It Looks”: Stresses of being a student-athlete
- “We’re Not Stereotypical Dummies”: Racial differences and stereotypes

The findings from this study could be used to inform parents, student-athletes, higher education administrators and others who regularly work with student-athletes.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There's an old saying, "football is a religion in Texas." The East Texas town that I grew up in is no exception. On Friday nights in the fall, unless you are out of town or under the weather, you are at a football game supporting the John Tyler Lions or the Robert E. Lee Red Raiders. Even if you live in one of the smaller surrounding towns, football rules and the players are legends.

Where I'm from, football players are treated like celebrities. It was privilege to sit by them in church, speak to them at the grocery store, and just be in the same room with them. In 1994, I watched the John Tyler High School Lions go undefeated and win the State Championship. From that moment forward, every local kid dreamed of playing football at John Tyler, wearing the "CUJO" jerseys, and winning a state championship. The players were always on the news, had trading cards in the local newspaper, and even won an ESPY for their game-winning performance against Plano East at Texas Stadium. At the time of this writing, a documentary about this group of champions is currently being filmed.

Football has its place in my family. While I, along with many of my cousins played, my dad is the one that everyone remembers. Known for his size and strength, my father was an exceptional running back in high school and played a year at the community college before getting injured. To this day, I still hear stories of how big he was and how he would take on would be defenders before breaking tackles. As a kid, I

admired him so much that I would often walk around the house in his old football jersey and letterman jacket.

My cousin was an exceptional running back at a much smaller school in one of the surrounding towns. His athletic ability in football and track generated offers from multiple institutions (including a full athletic scholarship to Southern Methodist University). When it was time to make a decision as to where he would go to school, he decided not to pursue sports. In fact, he decided to pursue a career working for a major corporation. Years later, he went back to school and earned two degrees (bachelors and masters).

As for me, sports was something I had the desire for but never the physical ability. I was very small, never had any real ability, and spent little time practicing to get better. Because of my small size and my mother's fear of injuries, good grades were always emphasized over athletic pursuits. It wasn't until fourth grade, after years of good grades and good behavior, that my parents allowed me to play flag football. In 7th and 8th grade, I was finally allowed to play full contact football. I also played basketball and ran track. Because of the "no pass, no play" rule, I worked hard in the classroom and in athletics. It is here where I first learned what it meant to be a student-athlete. I was always on the honor roll and did what I could to help other players on the team remain eligible. I went on to play football at John Tyler High School and was part of a state finalist team as a junior.

While I enjoyed some success on the field, my academic endeavors were even better. Because I wasn't much of an athlete, I always knew that I had to have a backup

plan. I had seen too many guys come back home from college or the NFL after suffering injuries, getting cut from a team, or flunking out of school. So I signed up for the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) program and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. It was here that I discovered my passion for learning and teaching. My mathematics, history, and Spanish instructors had unique methods of delivering course content in an understandable way. It was because of their teaching styles, approachability, and personal investment in each of us that I knew I would be a professor one day.

It was also here that I realized that only three or four of my Black teammates (and two Black males from the basketball team) were enrolled in any advanced courses (AP or I.B.). At that time, students had to choose from one of three achievement plans in order to graduate (Minimum, Recommended, or Distinguished). Because I was on Distinguished plan (and the majority of my teammates were on the Minimum or Recommended), I would gain a reputation for being smart and find myself frequently assisting teammates with homework. My high school was predominantly Black and Hispanic, and located directly across the street from an affordable housing complex. The White students that attended were either low SES, lived within the district boundaries and couldn't go to the predominantly White school across town, or forced to attend school there because we had the only International Baccalaureate (I.B.) Program in the city. By my junior year, my team consisted of about five White males, one Hispanic male, and the rest Black males.

I also grew to understand the politics of football during high school. While academic success was a “verbal” priority for coaches and administrators, it was clear that

football brought in the revenue and was the main event for our school district. Classrooms were falling apart, textbooks were outdated, and technology was seriously lacking. Meanwhile, plans were in the works to spend millions of dollars to renovate the football field to have turf instead of grass. By my senior year, I knew that I wasn't going to get a scholarship to play football anywhere. I had no touchdowns, no significant game footage to send to interested schools, and I was coming off an injury to my upper quad. However, a few schools had expressed interest in me as a student. I would get invitations to visit and even scholarship offers from schools like Clark Atlanta, Grambling University, University of Dallas, Tyler Junior College, and Southern Arkansas University. I went on to visit several of these schools and saw what they had to offer. While I enjoyed my visits, I knew that I still wanted to try and play football somewhere. Unfortunately, only two of the schools would even consider having me as a student athlete. My football coach attended Abilene Christian University (ACU) so I decided to see if I could at least walk-on there. I took an academic visit to the campus, enjoyed my time there, and knew that ACU was where I wanted to be. So after I graduated high school, I walked-on at ACU.

It was during my very short walk on experience that I saw, firsthand, how difficult playing football and trying to focus on academics could be. As a student-athlete, all of my time was wrapped up in football. Practice was early in the morning and again in the afternoon. When we did not have practice we were in film, the weight room, or in the trainer's office recovering. Going to class was tiring, difficult, and frustrating. So after

three days of being a walk-on (which is another set of challenges itself), I realized I no longer had the desire to participate in intercollegiate sports and left the team.

To this day football is still my favorite sport! I love college football most because I believe that the players work harder and are more competitive. I enjoy seeing student-athletes compete each week and leave everything that they have on the field.

Unfortunately, what is often shown in the media is not always positive. While both intercollegiate and professional athletics are viewed as providing educational and economic value for Black males, they are simultaneously criticized for reinforcing stereotypical images of Blacks as athletically superior and intellectually inferior (Oseguera, 2010). There are news reports of athletes (of all races) illegally accepting money from boosters or agents, getting kicked out school for smoking marijuana in their dorm rooms, domestic violence, or coming back home due to academic ineligibility. After years of observing these negative representations, I started to question whether or not Black males could play sports and be successful in the classroom at the same time. Where I'm from, only a very small number of student athletes have been able to do both successfully. And this is where my research interest was born. I want to know more about the experiences of Black males who are able to successfully navigate the athletic and academic arenas.

Background and Statement of the Problem

The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) is the governing body that oversees intercollegiate athletics. This membership-driven organization is dedicated to safeguarding the well-being of student-athletes and equipping them with the skills to

succeed on the playing field, in the classroom, and throughout life (NCAA, 2014). As a non-profit educational association, the NCAA administers college sport and promulgates and enforces rules agreed upon by its 1027 member schools that provide athletic programs for approximately 325,000 athletes (Meggysesy, 2000). The NCAA is divided into three Divisions and comprised of multiple sports—Division I, Division II, and Division III. Within Division I there were two levels of completion, Football Bowl SubDivision (FBS) and Football Championship SubDivision (FCS). At the end of the season for FBS teams, the teams with the best records play bowl games (i.e.- Sugar Bowl, Orange, Fiesta Bowl, and Rose Bowl). In Division I football, millions of dollars are made each year in revenue off football games alone (Harper, Williams, Blackman, 2013; USA Today, 2013). However, this money is made despite the retention and academic success of players.

Black student athletes have been the focus of study regarding academic and psychosocial adjustment to college since the 1960s (Melendez, 2008). More specifically, the educational achievement of Black male student athletes has become a topic of scholarly interest. Especially troubling to many has been the academic performance of some Black football and basketball players at the highest levels of intercollegiate competition— scholarship recipients at NCAA Division I, revenue-producing schools (Beamon, 2009; Benson, 2000, Comeaux, 2008; Comeaux, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Donnor, 2005; Edwards, 2000; Harrison, 2002; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Lapchick, 1988; Singer, 2005). The dual role of a student and athlete becomes more difficult to balance with the negative labels and perceptions toward this nontraditional

student group (Comeaux, 2008). In addition to dealing with the psychological and sociocultural stressors of being a student-athlete, they also have to combat the myths and stereotypes commonly held by members of their campus community that they are all less intelligent, more violent, and from low-income backgrounds (Messer, 2006). As a result, the operating framework used by schools to serve Black males in general is often based on lists of perceived problems, using an approach that identifies pathologies instead of promoting promise (Bonner & Bailey, 2006).

Black male student-athletes are often viewed as academically inferior or unintelligent without fully understanding their experiences in U.S. institutions of higher learning (Martin, 2005). The experiences of student-athletes, in general, differ from their non-athlete peers. For instance, student-athletes have to work almost twice as hard as non-student-athletes because of grueling practices, travel schedules, mid-week games, team meetings, film sessions, and rehabilitation for nagging injuries as a result of their participation in college sports (Comeaux, Speer, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011). To execute the skills they have perfected effectively under intense competitive pressure, athletes must also exercise control (self-efficacy) over the performance-impairing effects of acute stressors (e.g., headaches, muscular tension, etc.), disruptive ideation, discouraging slumps and setbacks, and vexing pain that comes with participation in athletics (Bandura, 1997). On top of all that, they are still expected to perform satisfactorily in the classroom. Unfortunately, more is known about deficient test scores, failing grades, and specialized programs for this population than about their curricular and co-curricular experiences that these interventions are supposed to help improve

(Benson, 2000). Therefore, the experiences of Black male student athletes who are excelling academically and athletically deserve closer examination. Researchers should examine those strategies being used by this high achieving population to complete their degrees successfully (Messer, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

This study is an attempt to examine the academic, social, and athletic experiences and self-perceptions of academic success among high achieving Black male football players at predominantly White Division I institutions in South. My overarching research question asks: What are the experiences of high-achieving Black male football players at predominantly White Division I schools in the South? Additionally, I explore the following questions: (1) How do high-achieving Black male football players describe their experiences in and out of academic settings? (2) To whom or what do they attribute their academic and athletic success? (3) What is the perceived relationship between their academic achievement and athletic performance? Answers to these questions will help to inform the current perceptions of the factors lead to academic and athletic success among the participants.

Theory (whether empirical or rational) is developed through the lenses, or perspectives, of those who create or describe it (McEwen, 2003). Self-efficacy theory, attribution theory, and stereotype threat serve as the theoretical bases for my study. More specifically, these theories will be used to examine the motivating factors and the experiences (in and out of class) of high-achieving Black male football players at Division I schools.

Significance of the Study

High-achieving Black male student-athletes need the opportunity to have their voices heard. Being identified as high-achievers does not necessarily preempt them from encountering barriers to their achievement (Whiting, 2009). By giving participants the opportunity to openly share their stories, institutions will have greater insight into the actual lived-experiences of Black male student athletes and a clearer understanding of what is (and is not) working in the educational systems and processes constructed for them (Benson, 2000). The findings from this study will also assist college administrators, faculty, coaches, and National College Athletic Association (NCAA) administrators in creating the effective programming, policies, and interventions that will aid in reversing the current trend of academic failure amongst Black male student athletes in higher education (Martin, 2005). Documenting the strategies employed by high-achieving Black male football players could serve as an incentive for improving the way they are currently being served by the institutions they attend.

Secondly, more emphasis needs to be placed on pursuing educational endeavors among young Black males. The prevailing image of Black men in America is an overwhelmingly negative one (White & Cones, 1999). Black families, unfortunately, have been inclined to push their children toward sport career aspirations, often to the detriment of other critically important areas of personal and cultural development (Edwards, 2000). Blacks are far from equitably represented in the stories, programs, and advertisements seen, heard, and read today (Chideya, 1995). This is evident in mass media where there are constant images of Black men being glorified because they

attained financial success through sports and entertainment, to the near exclusion of other means of being successful in life (Beamon & Bell, 2002). The message from most of the media identifies sport as a way for anyone who has talent and is willing to work hard to improve his or her status in life (Harris, 1997). As a result, many young Black males believe that making it as a professional athlete or entertainer are their only options. Unlike White children, Black children see very few lawyers, doctors, teachers, or scientists of their own race in the media and in life (Beamon, 2009). These extremely limited representations are misleading and only highlight one aspect of the many achievements within the Black community. This study seeks to insert more positive images into the current portrayal of Black male student athletes.

This study was created out of an interest in how this particular population manages to deal with the academic and athletic demands on their lives (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). An ardent level of commitment is an important and necessary prerequisite for participation at the level of the elite athlete (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011). It was earlier noted that student athletes must work harder, in and out of class, than non-student-athletes (assuming that non-student athletes have no other responsibilities). As such, this study is an effort to bring more attention to the experiences of successful student athletes and learn more about how they balance the roles of student and athlete.

Lastly, it is my hope that this study makes a meaningful contribution to educational research from a K-16 educational perspective. The experiences of Black males in K-12 institutions inform their choices about college (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

What classes to take, whether or not to participate in sports, and the decision to even attend college are each decided upon during the elementary and secondary years of schooling. Black male student athletes—both in high school and college—have the most to gain from this project, as it presents qualitative reflections of the experiences of their high-achieving peers (Harper, 2003). The closer education researchers and practitioners get to finding out what the schooling (and athletic) experience is like for all participants involved in this study, the better we may be able to educate all, not just some, student-athletes (Benson, 2000).

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

In this section, I review literature that is essential for the examination of Black male student athlete experiences. I begin this section by introducing socialization, its impact on Black children, and how it affects Black male athletes. I follow up with a discussion of Black male student athletes' success despite racism and negative perceptions about their academic abilities. Lastly, I emphasize the role of stereotypes in the lives of Black males in general and athletes.

Socialization

Socialization is the principal process by which the codes and sanctions of a social order are imposed on individuals (Boykin & Toms, 1985). This is the stage of development where individuals are taught gender roles, societal norms, appropriate behavior, etc. Although this should primarily be the role of the family, other agents (peers, institutions, media, etc.) have been found to play more serious roles in the socialization of children. Boykin and Toms (1985) say that these additional socialization systems should thus play a reinforcing or augmenting role to that provided by one's family of origin (p. 34). More often than not, unfortunately, external socializing agents play the primary role in the socialization process (especially when it comes to Black children and sports). An important question in the sociology of sport is how and why some people become involved in sport while others do not (Harris, 1994).

Formally (schools, churches, etc.) and informally (family, peers, etc.), individuals can be socialized into sport roles (McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989). Harris (1994)

conducted an investigation that sought to determine whether or not Black student athletes are encouraged by the Black community to participate in sports. Nineteen summer basketball teams in Washington, D.C. were administered a questionnaire. Participants were 116 Black and 59 White basketball players (grades 9-12). The specific research questions examined whether or not Blacks are more likely than Whites to perceive overall support and assistance from significant others for involvement in basketball, and whether or not perceived help for sport involvement is related to future expectations (Harris, 1994). The author found that differences in sport socialization existed among Blacks and Whites. However, these findings differ from that of Edwards (2000) in that it was the teachers, coaches, and friends that served as the main sources of encouragement to participate in sports — not the parents and family (Harris, 1994).

Many entities encourage children to participate in sports because it is commonly believed to facilitate positive resolutions of developing autonomy, establishing identity, managing relationships, and planning for the future (Cornelius, 1995). Cornelius (1995) studied the relationship that exists between athletic identity, peer and faculty socialization, and college student development. Participants were 224 undergraduate students (ages 18-24) from P.E. classes at a university in the Southeast. Subjects were asked to provide demographic information (e.g., age, GPA, gender, race) for background purposes — the most important being history of athletic activities. The instrumentation involved several procedures that measured athletic identity, social involvement, and college student development. Three measures were used to determine the participant's athletic identity: (1) Number of hours per week spent participating in athletic activities,

(2) Highest level of competition participants had reached (1=recreational, 2 intramural, 3 club sport, 4=junior varsity, 5=varsity), (3) Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). Findings revealed that a relationship exists between athletic involvement and personal development of those who participate. This suggests that involvement and psychological investment in any campus activity (e.g., academics, student government, recreational sports) is related to enhanced student development and formation (or maintenance) of stronger identities within the self-concept (Cornelius, 1995).

Socialization (whether intentional or unintentional) plays a vital role in the lives of Black males. It is during the socialization process that this group develops an athletic identity that follows them throughout adulthood (Beamon, 2010). Therefore, Beamon (2010) examined the overemphasis of sports in the lives of Black males. She argued that an elevated level of sports socialization in the family, neighborhood, and media exists within the Black community, creating an overrepresentation of Black males in certain sports (p. 281). In the study, 20 Black former student athletes were interviewed using social learning theory (observation) and social learning theories (reproduction of an observed behavior of others) as theoretical frameworks. Results showed that family, role models, neighborhood, media, and the Black community were key agents in the overemphasizing of sports in the socializing of Black male athletes.

In summation, everyone experiences socialization in some form or another. For example, it's through socialization that boys are taught to hold doors for women or when young children are taught to say "yes mam/sir" or "no mam/sir" when talking to adults. It's also through socialization where some children are highly encouraged to play sports.

Socialization into sports is a process associated with agents or agencies that are influential in attracting children to sports. This type of socialization includes learning social, psychological, and physical skills needed for athletic involvement and development (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1978). For Black males, this emphasis on sports participation often comes at the expense of neglecting other pursuits (including academics). This more intense socialization into sport has been offered as a possible explanation for their more extensive participation in athletics in comparison to White males (Beamon & Bell, 2002). A deeper understanding of the motivation behind athletic achievement (as well as academic) could provide further insight into the impact of socialization on Black male student athletes.

Motivation and Achievement

Motivation and achievement, by definition, involve feelings and stimuli that lead to a particular result. In achievement related-contexts, however, individual motivation to achieve differs from person to person. In educational pursuits, for example, motivation to achieve may come from family and peers (external). On the other hand, some individuals are motivated from a desire to prove something to themselves (internal). The traditional views of motivation and achievement are very linear (i.e. - Students are either motivated or not motivated). In either case, success and failure do not occur in a vacuum (Weiner, 2001). Other approaches to student motivation, however, embrace what it is called the social cognitive model (combining the motivational and cognitive factors). Social cognitive models stress that students can be motivated in multiple ways and the important issue is in the understanding how and why students are motivated for school achievement

(Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Evidence from attributional research indicates that an individual's attributions for his or her outcomes are key in determining achievement behavior (van Laar, 2001).

Motivation to succeed in the academic and athletic domains has been explored by Woodruff and Schallert (2008). Their study investigated how motivation and self-perceptions impact student performance (emotionally, behaviorally, and mentally). The contexts of academic and athletic pursuits join together two different sets of motivations and perceptions to create a major part of the experiences of the student-athlete (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). The data consisted of four women and five men full-scholarship student-athletes (European descent, n=5; African-American, n=3; Spanish language heritage, n=1). The study found that a relationship exists between student motivation and self, defined as the *motivational sense of self*. Students fall into three groups in terms of their academic and athletic motivation—*love it* (internally driven), *bought into* (of some importance and value to the participants), and *talked into/getting something from it* (external motivation). The primary result of the analysis was a model depicting how inseparable were the motivational and self processes that student-athletes experienced in negotiating who they were and what motivated them in the domains of athletics and academics from the time they had entered college (Woodruff & Schallert, 2008).

Motivation and achievement among Black males who excel academically has been linked to engagement outside of the classroom. In his study of 32 high-achieving Black males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Harper (2003) found that being a “high-achiever” includes having a good support system (e.g., family, friends, teachers),

being involved on campus, being different from other Black men on the campus, stressors (e.g., academic performance, time constraints, relationships, personal health) and taking advantage of campus/community resources (e.g., tutoring, organizations). The participants in this study confirmed that most of the seemingly irreversible trends that disadvantage many of their same-race male peers could be overcome or at least muted by intentionally choosing to devote out-of class time to a variety of meaningful learning experiences (Harper, 2005). Although the participants in this study were not athletes, findings from this study are applicable and helpful for all Black male students (including those who participate in intercollegiate sports).

The academic institution can actually deter the motivation and achievement of Black male student athletes. In her qualitative study of this population of students, Benson (2000) found that the institution can significantly hinder their academic progress. The researcher conducted a qualitative investigation at a large Division I PWI in the southeast. Three seniors, one junior, and 4 sophomore Black male football players (all on scholarship, and play vital roles at their position) agreed to participate. GPA's for these participants ranged from 1.6 to 2.3 which put them all on the team's "academically at-risk list. Findings showed that minimal expectations, lack of reinforcement, and no academic accountability led to poor academic performance among the participants. These findings should provide a catalyst for the further examination of the extent to which the stated end of improving Black student-athletes' learning and academic performance is being achieved by the policies and practices in place in academic programs for at-risk student-athletes (Benson, 2000).

The success or failure of Black male athletes has serious implications for retention. Thus, Person and LeNoir (1997) did a study of 31 Black male student athletes receiving athletic scholarships. Each participant was randomly sampled from a larger study, surveyed, interviewed, and invited to take part in focus group interviews. Given the attrition rate of this population of college campuses, the need to look at possible strategies that will increase retention is paramount (Person & LeNoir, 1997). Results showed that Black male athletes (in this study) required financial assistance, mostly came from college-educated families, were more likely to be retained than non-athletes, and felt supported. The earlier students enrolled in a retention program at one of these institutions, the more likely they were to persist at the institution and in their major (Person & LeNoir, 1997).

The ability to overcome adversity is a necessary skill for the achievement and motivation of Black male student athletes. For this population of students, racism is an obstacle that appears far too often. Sanders (1997) studied achievement as a motivational tool for overcoming racism. She contended that despite racial discrimination, many Black Americans possessed an achievement ethos that demands a commitment to excellence for both individual and collective mobility (Sanders, 1997). Thus, in her study of 28 Black urban eighth grade students, she found that racial awareness impacted performance among the participants. In other words, the more aware of racism/racial barriers the students were, the better they performed in class. Student awareness to racism or racial barriers fell into one of three categories: 1) minimalization or denial (n=7), 2) moderate to low awareness (n=11); and 3) high awareness (n=10) (p. 88-89).

These findings are consistent with Steele's (1997) Stereotype Threat theory, which suggests that those to whom a stereotype is assumed will overperform or underperform in the presence of that stereotype.

How Black male student athletes view themselves and their abilities is just as important to achievement as how they believe others view them. This includes their self-perceptions of ability, attributions, and motivational factors (internal or external). Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1984) examined student achievement as it relates to self-efficacy (or "beliefs about one's ability"). They argued that the self-efficacy beliefs that students have could very well determine whether or not they will persist towards degree completion or succeed in their vocation (more specifically science and engineering). This study consisted of 42 students (male, n=28; female, n=14) enrolled in a 10-week career and educational planning course for students wanting to pursue careers in science and engineering at a technical college. The researchers found that both level and strength of self-efficacy for educational requirements were generally related to academic outcome (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984). Students with high self-efficacy did better in the course and persisted longer than those who scored lower. This study shows that belief (positive or negative) in personal ability is very helpful in understanding how high-achieving students excel. Even with high self-efficacy, however, minority students must deal with the consequences of racism and stereotyping.

Understanding motivational factors that lead to achievement, as well as what the individual attributes his successes to, is very important when looking at the experiences of Black male football players. Motivational factors differ from person to person. Based

on the studies previously mentioned in this section, we know that student-athletes are driven internally or externally. We also know that in some cases, the institution can hinder the success of its students (knowingly and unknowingly). Likewise, if the institution wants to be intentional about helping to motivate its students, out-of-class engagement is an important factor. This could also lead to an increase in retention (which has proven difficult for PWI's in recent years). Lastly, self-perception and the ability to overcome adversity, also serve as motivational factors among Black male student athletes.

Racism and Stereotypes

Racism and stereotypes are, unfortunately, common in the United States. While U.S. colleges and universities today are open to students of all races, recent court rulings in affirmative action cases, college desegregation litigation, and the differing enrollment patterns of American students suggest that race is still a matter of concern in higher education (Jackson, Sweeney, & Welcher, 2014). Historically, American educational institutions have been some of the most visible perpetrators of racism against Blacks (Singer, 2005). Majors and Billson (1992) also noted that, "Historically, racism and discrimination have inflicted a variety of harsh injustices on Blacks in the United States, especially on males" (p. 1). Racism is the system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, Native Americans, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color (Marable, 2004). It also leads to discrimination or oppression based on sexuality, religious beliefs, (dis)abilities, etc. It sometimes manifests in the form of offensive remarks (verbally, written, or

displayed in plain view of the public) or discriminatory treatment of an individual (or group) based on race/ethnicity. It is also a system of advantage based on race (Tatum, 2004). Even though laws protecting the civil rights of Black Americans now exist and provide improved conditions in some private and public sectors, domination and subordination of Black Americans is still institutionally systemic in the U.S. (Sage, 1993).

A stereotype is a distorted picture of a category of people that the out-group (and even in-group members) accepts as part of the cultural heritage (Harris, 1993). Stereotypes are at work when people are not viewed as individuals with unique cultural and social backgrounds, with different religious traditions and ethnic identities, but as two-dimensional characters bred from the preconceived attitudes, half-truths, ignorance, and fear of closed minds (Marable, 2004). A significant part of the negative stereotype about Blacks concerns intellectual ability (Steele, 2003). All students, having absorbed years of indoctrination by families, peers, and mass media, come to the university with stereotypes about people different from themselves (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). Black men arrive on campus having to deal with others' perceptions of them and the myths and stereotypes associated with them (Person & LeNoir, 1997). While these and other injustices exist in the larger American society, many people believe sport is immune from these conditions (Brooks & Althouse, 1993). The following studies will demonstrate the contrary.

Lawrence (2005) claims that race plays a key role in the lives of Black athletes but not in the lives of White athletes. When asked about their experiences with racism in

their sport, the participants (4 Black females and 4 Black males from 8 different sports) identified 22 different encounters with racism. Among the racist encounters shared with the researcher by the participants, five major themes emerged: 1) being hurt, 2) outrage and shock, 3) team togetherness, 4) being empowered, 5) differences (p. 102). ‘Being hurt’ described the emotional stress felt by the participants when they experienced some form of inequity or disparate treatment. ‘Outrage and shock’ is a description of the participants’ responses encounters with discrimination through racial slurs, portrayal in the media, etc. ‘Team togetherness’ describes the unity and friendship participants felt with other Blacks on campus. ‘Being empowered’ explains the sense of empowerment felt by the participants during racial encounters. Lastly, ‘differences’ is the theme used to describe the moment when participants became “aware” of what makes them different from other students (mostly their White counterparts). These results indicate that the ability to deal with racial encounters, regardless of feelings, is essential to the success of Black student athletes.

Black male student-athletes often experience racism while participating in sports. Ever since Blacks were invited to participate in college sport at PWIs, they have been exploited for their athletic prowess, to the detriment of other areas of their development (i.e., academic/intellectual, career/vocational, social, etc.) (Singer, 2005). Therefore, it is important to explore their feelings about racism and how they deal with racist encounters/perceptions. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, Singer (2005) conducted a case study that examined Black male student-athletes perceptions of racism and its impact on their overall educational experiences. Four Black

male football players (all scholarship recipients) with aspirations to play professionally took part in a series of semi-structured focus group interviews. The researcher found that participants believed that Black athletes don't get the same opportunities as White players. Each participant asserted that there is a lack of opportunities for Blacks on the field (e.g., quarterback) and off the field (e.g., athletic directors), and that they are treated differently than their White counterparts (Singer, 2005). Access to sport for Black athletes has expanded greatly in the past quarter century, but very few opportunities have been made available in positions in the upper levels of the sport hierarchy (Sage, 1993). Recruitment and retention of Black athletic administrators, coaches, and academic staff is key to improving the college experiences of Black male student athletes (Martin et al., 2010).

Regarding the campus climate, the perception of racial tension plays a major role in college student development. Fear, conscious and unconscious prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, patterns of misinformation, and stereotyping toward student-athletes all may be instilled and perpetuated by members of the campus community (Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995). Most of the racism observed on campuses is undoubtedly influenced by the general social context, yet a great deal can be learned about the nature of U.S. campuses by examining Black, Chicano, and White student perceptions in institutional contexts associated with campus racial tension (Hurtado, 1992). Hurtado (1992) found that 12% of all students at four-year institutions feel that racial discrimination is no longer an issue and that 1 in 4 students perceives "considerable" tension. In essence, racial climate varies from campus to campus. Thus, perceptions of

racial tension are not created solely in the minds of specific individuals, but rather are rooted in a shared institutional reality (Hurtado, 1992).

Interaction across various racial groups can also have an impact on campus racial climate. Jackson, Sweeney, and Welcher (2014) conducted a study that examines the student perceptions of racial segregation on campus in terms of interaction across racial groups. The authors conducted 14 focus groups (that consisted of over 70 undergraduate students from various ethnicities-Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific-Islander, White, and multiracial) to see how students describe the experience of non-interaction across racial groups on campus. Jackson, Sweeney, and Welcher (2014) note that lack of interaction across racial groups on college campuses is often attributed to student choice or “self-segregation” (p. 3). Results from the focus groups showed despite having friends within different racial groups, participants still believed a “racial divide” existed and expressed a desire for more interaction across racial groups. Participants also noted that the lack of interaction across racial was “just natural”, “instinctive”, and “just happens” (p. 9). Another theme that emerged were the “perceived limitations to out-group interaction” (p. 9). For instance, participants questioned whether or not they were welcome on campus and felt pressure from their friends (within their own racial group) to not participate gatherings or events with diverse groups in attendance. Lastly, the researchers found that among White students and students of color that blamed other groups for the self-segregation that existed on their campus. Understanding explanations of why racial segregation occurs helps identify strategies to increase interaction across race lines (Jackson, Sweeney, & Welcher, 2014).

Oseguera (2010) sought to examine the experiences of academically successful Black male athletes, despite the negative perceptions about them. Seventeen Black male student athletes (current and former) from public, research 1, and Division 1 institutions on the west coast participated in the study. Findings showed that all participants had experienced personal attacks on their intellectual abilities despite their consistent records of academic success. Participants in this study were former student-athletes who graduated from Division I institutions on the West coast and who had maintained a B average while participating in sports (Oseguera, 2010). The author classified three recurrent themes that were aimed at the student athlete's academic ability and identity: (1) academic frauds (i.e.-believed not to be at the institution based on academic ability); (2) intellectually challenged (attacks on the participants intellect by campus personnel, peers, and athletic academic support staff); and (3) athlete-students (external notion they were athletes first, not students). The author classified the participants' coping strategies into the following four categories: 1) disguise athletic identity; 2) distrust higher education personnel and peers; 3) refuse academic assistance; 4) avoid courses with other student-athletes (Oseguera, 2010). Despite all of the negativity and deficit perspective, each participant excelled. Each of these findings is helpful for higher education personnel who have regular contact with Black male student-athletes.

The recruiting of Black male athletes is proof that stereotypes play a huge part in the lives of these young men. Each year, one of the most visible issues in sports is the recruiting of "blue-chip" recruits to major universities (Harrison, 2008). Highly solicited scholarship athletes are courted by the university and placed on a pedestal (Person &

LeNoir, 1997). In his investigation about the perceptions of the campus, the athletic recruiting process (especially high-profile African Americans), and African American male student athletes, Harrison (2008) invited 167 students (149 Whites, 18 African Americans) enrolled in an introductory survey class at a highly selective Midwestern university to participate in this study. Participants were given a 30-minute survey and then viewed a film clip about recruiting (visual elicitation) from a film, *The Program* (1994), and then asked to respond to the structured items. Two themes emerged among the Black participants: Athleticated (awareness of the advantages that come with recruiting visits) and sex objects. Among White participants, four themes emerged: Athleticated (college athletes seen as “larger than life”), sex objects, media stereotypes, and unrealistic depiction. These themes demonstrate two things: 1) The pervasiveness of racial stigma and preconceived notions about Black male football and basketball players on predominantly White campuses; and 2) that Black student-athletes have to deal with campus stereotypes associated with being Black and a student athlete (Harrison, 2008).

Other research has considered the role of stereotypes in the experiences of successful Black male student athletes. Martin et al (2010) interviewed 27 Black male student-athletes (i.e., football, basketball, track and field, and soccer) from four Research I institutions (i.e., Stanford, UC Berkeley, UCLA, and USC) on the west coast of the U.S. The authors used stereotype reactance (how participants respond to stereotypes) as a theoretical frame for the study and identified four themes: “I Had to Prove I’m Worthy”; “I’m a Perceived Threat to Society”; “It’s About Time Management”; and “It’s About Pride and Hard Work.” Each of these themes brings awareness to the actual needs of

Black male student athletes. These themes should also encourage coaches and athletic directors to be more “hands on” and involved in the overall academic success of their athletes (Martin et al., 2010).

Summary of the Reviewed Literature

As the number of Black males participating in intercollegiate sports continues to increase, their voices and lived realities must inform the K-16 practices, policies, and reform initiatives (Amah, 2009) that affect them. Much of the literature presented in this section highlights issues that remain prevalent in major college sports (e.g., racism, stereotypes, overemphasis of athletic pursuits). However, this section also identifies a gap in literature addressing high-achieving Black male student-athletes. This section also focused on the need for a better understanding of motivation and achievement among this population. The impetus for high-achievers’ leadership and active engagement is profound, multifaceted (Harper, 2005), and worth further investigation (which is what the current study does). Lastly, the literature also advances a sociocultural understanding of the status of Black male student athletes, one of the most stereotyped populations on college campuses (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2012). It is my hope that this research promotes achievement in academic and athletic pursuits, inspires future research on this topic, and increases awareness of the experiences of this gifted population.

Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy theory, attribution theory, and stereotype threat (and their importance to this study) will be discussed in this chapter. I begin this chapter with a discussion of Self-Efficacy Theory. Self-efficacy describes the beliefs about one’s ability

to successfully perform a given task or behavior (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984). I also discuss Attribution Theory and the significance of attributions on achievement striving (Weiner, 1972). Lastly, this chapter will demonstrate the impact of stereotype threat and its effects (positive and negative) on the student-athlete. In addition, this chapter will help to justify the chosen research design and methods employed in this study. The goal is for each theory to bring readers one step closer to a more informed understanding of the phenomena and participants under investigation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Educators have long recognized that students' beliefs about their academic capabilities play an essential role in their motivation to achieve (Zimmerman, 2000). Albert Bandura initially proposed self-efficacy as a theoretical framework to explain and predict behavior change (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984). Bandura (1997) later went on to define self-efficacy theory as the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. Because acting on misjudgments of personal efficacy can produce adverse consequences, accurate appraisal of one's own capabilities has considerable functional value (Bandura, 1982). Bandura (1997) explains that:

Such beliefs in their efficacy influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress

and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize (p. 3).

These individual beliefs, or efficacy expectations, stem from various life events that influence the manner in which individuals respond to stimuli.

Bandura (1977) identified four main sources of efficacy expectations—*performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal*. Performance accomplishments are based on the individual experiences. Vicarious experiences are based upon the experiences and actions of external agents (e.g. other people). Verbal persuasion is the appraisal (positive or negative; internal or external) given to individuals based on performance or ability. Lastly, emotional arousal is the physical response to a given performance or task (e.g.- sweaty hands, nervous feeling, etc.). Expectations of mastery is thus increased with continuous success or lowered with continual failures. The effects of failure, however, depend upon the timing and the total pattern of experiences in which they occur (Bandura, 1977). These notions would lead Bandura to conclude that self-efficacy theory could explain individual motivation, achievement, and personal capabilities. Thus, self-efficacy theory is critical to the current study of Black male student-athletes who have been academically successful (Martin, 2005).

Attribution Theory

Weiner's (1986) attribution theory is helpful in the investigation of achievement and motivation among high-achieving Black male student athletes. The theory itself is a causal ascriptive theory that seeks to understand why individuals are successful. The

perceived causes of success and failure share three common properties: locus, stability, and controllability (Weiner, 1985). Locus refers to whether the cause of a success or failure is internal (ability) or external (task difficulty) to the individual (Swinton, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2011). Individuals with an internal locus of causality attribute success to themselves or their individual ability. Individuals with an external locus of causality, however, attribute success or failure to outside sources (peer groups, teachers, institutions, etc.). Stability refers to whether or not the cause of the outcome changes over time (Martinko & Thomson, 1998). For example, effort is perceived as internal and stable, whereas luck is viewed as external and unstable (Swinton et al, 2011). In achievement-related contexts, success may be attributed to high ability and/or effort, while failure is perceived as due to low ability and/or lack of effort (Weiner, 1972). Lastly, controllability refers to the causes of success or failure as “controllable” by anyone (Swinton et al, 2011; Weiner, 1986). For the purposes of this study, I focus on ability and effort attributions made by participants in regards to their academic and athletic success.

Stereotype Threat

Claude Steele (1997) defines stereotype threat as the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant (or aware), usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one’s self definition. This threat arises when a person from a specific group is in a situation or is completing a task for which a negative stereotype about that group can be applied (i.e.-Black male student athletes).

The predicament the person is in threatens him/her with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype (Steele, 1997). Stereotypes may interfere with the intellectual functioning of these students, particularly during standardized testing. Stereotype threat does not prompt test takers to give up or try less. If anything, it makes people try harder (Aronson, 2004).

This need to over perform or prove something, however, can have positive and negative consequences. As the threat persists over time (especially when negative), however, it could also pressure students to become disengaged or dis-identify with achievement in school. Participants in the present study, however, have found ways to persist. In other words, they have adopted a “performance goal orientation” or an ability to resist responding to stereotype threat (Aronson, Fried, and Good, 2002). Hence, documenting student-athletes experiences of coping with negative stereotypes provides a useful vehicle on shedding light on an important source of bias in U.S. institutions of higher education (Martin et al, 2010). Therefore, stereotype threat will be a vital component in the understanding of high-achieving Black male student athletes.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This section lays the theoretical foundation for this entire study. Each theory provided a justification for the use of each component in the research design and further emphasized the importance of the study. Self-efficacy theory helped to explain the motivational behavior of students and emphasized the importance of individual beliefs. Attribution theory provides valuable insight into the contexts of high performing

individuals. It may also be confirmatory during the analysis of participant responses. Lastly, understanding how participants respond in the presence (or perception) of stereotypes is essential when studying achievement-related behavior among historically underrepresented students. As we move into the research design chapter, each theory will continue provide insight into the phenomenon of Black male achievement and validate each research question.

Chapter 3

Research Design

This chapter is an in-depth discussion of the methods and procedures utilized during this study. I begin with a brief discussion of the qualitative approach and the methodology employed to go about collecting the data. I then describe the data collection sites, how I went about the recruitment process, and then provide a participant profile. I then move into the data-collection stage where I describe the interviews, documents and artifacts, fieldnotes, and data analysis. I end this chapter by demonstrating how I established trustworthiness, describe the role of the researcher, and a brief summary of the chapter.

A Qualitative Approach

As with all research endeavors, choosing the research approach that is best suited to the line of inquiry is vital to obtaining the desired results (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Qualitative inquiry is the approach utilized for this study. Qualitative research studies phenomena in its natural settings, attempts to make sense of, or interprets the phenomenon according to the meanings of the participants who are experiencing the phenomenon (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon being interpreted is Black male achievement. The participants are high-achieving Black male football players and the universities they attend are their natural settings.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological approach, I describe (from the perspective of the participants) the experiences Black males who excel in the class and in their respective

athletic arena. Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience (Moran, 2000). In phenomenological research, the researcher explores the nature of the phenomenon as lived by the person (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) and provides a deeper understanding. Founded by the philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl, phenomenological research investigates the human experience as we live it (Van Manen, 1990). Borg, Gall, and Gall (2007) took this explanation further by noting that phenomenological research also studies phenomena in its natural settings, attempts to make sense of, or interprets the phenomenon according to the meanings of the participants who are experiencing the phenomenon. For the purposes of this study, Black male football players are the participants and the phenomenon is how they experience academic and athletic achievements.

Unlike other methodological approaches such as discourse analysis or grounded theory, the phenomenological approach seeks to study a perceived reality or phenomenon that already exists. Through close examination of individual experiences, phenomenological analysts seek to capture the meaning and common features, or essences of an experience or event (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The data collected in a phenomenological approach results in descriptive information of the perceived reality. That information is then organized to show commonalities in the experiences of the participants (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The focus of the research study is to describe what Black male student athletes experience daily, how they experience it (in the class,

peers, society, etc.), and the meanings they make of their experiences (self-perceptions) (Moustakas, 1994).

Sites

This study was conducted at two major research 1 institutions in the south. To protect the identity of the research participants, minimal descriptors will be given and the institutions will be referred to as Eastern Valley State University (EVSU) and Coastal Plains University (CPU). Each institution is similar in terms of enrollment, geographic proximity, and football traditions. Both campuses are public, land-grant, and Division I Football Bowl SubDivision schools with numerous bowl game appearances and reputable football programs. Only EVSU has won multiple national championships in football. EVSU has an undergraduate enrollment of 21,451 while CPU boasts an undergraduate enrollment of 24,179. There are 1,500 Black undergraduate students at EVSU and 871 Black undergraduate students at CPU. EVSU has a six-year graduation rate of 63.6%, with Blacks graduating at 54.9%. CPU has a six-year graduation rate of 82.5%, with Blacks graduating at 75.2%.

Recruitment

Negotiating access to conduct research with student-athletes in major college sport programs can be a challenging process (Singer, 2005). Therefore, every intention was made to make contact with and establish a good rapport with gatekeepers at multiple institutions. Creswell (2008) defines gatekeepers as the individuals who have an official or unofficial role at the site, provide entrance to a site, help researchers locate people, and assist in the identification of places to study. An initial consultation with the athletic

administrators and counselors from the universities took place to introduce the aims of the study and to identify all Black male football players who would be eligible to participate in the study (Martin et al, 2010). Any institution with a Division 1 football program was identified as a potential site. Upon receiving dissertation committee and institutional review board (IRB) approvals, gatekeepers at each institution were contacted via email and phone. What I quickly discovered was that gatekeepers at each institution vary according to function. In most cases, I found myself speaking to those who oversee the academic aspects of athletic participation at each institution (e.g., directors of student athlete academic services, academic counselors). This proved to be both tedious and frustrating at times because I kept being sent to person after person until someone said no or just quit responding to my correspondence. Out of 53 institutions that were eligible (4 year, public, Division 1 schools), 36 were contacted and received invitations to participate. Of the 36, 5 rejected the invitations and 2 accepted-EVSU and CPU.

Participants

The participants in this study were five Black male football players who were enrolled full-time, in good standing with the university (e.g. not suspended, benched, or on academic probation,) and have earned a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 and up. Because athletes have very complicated schedules to navigate and copious responsibilities, the exclusive criteria almost certainly limited participation in this study. Each participant was classified as sophomores or juniors at the time of the research study. First-year students (freshmen and transfers) were not invited to participate because they

had not been at their particular institutions long enough to have established the relationships needed nor had the experiences needed to make a meaningful contribution to this investigation. Also, some athletes because of NCAA eligibility rules are able to attend graduate school and play sports at their institution. For the purposes of this study, however, I was only interested in the experiences of undergraduate Black male football players. Each participant was also on a full athletic scholarship, and classified as a starter or important reserve player. The experiences of scholarship athletes versus non-scholarship athletes are extremely different because the stakes are higher. Gatekeepers who served as advisor, counselors, and student-athlete academic services personnel from EVSU and CPU chose each participant. See Table 3-1 for a brief profile of each participant.

Table 3-1 Participant Profile

PSEUDONYM	AGE	MAJOR	CLASS	GPA	SCHOOL
Charles Xavier	20	Business Management	Sophomore	3.2	Eastern Valley State University (EVSU)
Parker Lewis	19	Graphic Design	Sophomore	3.5	Eastern Valley State University (EVSU)
Billy Batson	19	Communications/Multi media Journalism	Sophomore	3.2	Coastal Plains University (CPU)
T'Challa Asare	21	Psychology	Junior	3.1	Coastal Plains University (CPU)
Oliver McQueen	19	Biological Science	Sophomore	3.1	Coastal Plains University (CPU)

While each of these participants are exceptional and deserve praise for what they have accomplished, each of them arrived at their respective institutions with certain structural advantages that are not commonly afforded to other students. There are many studies that identify having parents with a college, two parents in the home, or other pre-college characteristics as predictors of success in college. In 1999, the College Board reported the following:

Socioeconomic status is generally one of the most powerful predictors of students' academic achievement. Students from low-income homes, or who have parents with little formal education, are much more likely to be low achievers and much less likely to be high achievers than students from high-income families, or who have parents with bachelor's or advanced degrees (p. 9).

For the exception of one, each participant came from a home where the parents had attended college and earned a degree. So it should come as not surprise that the five participants in this study are highly motivated, successful, and achieving in the academic and athletic domains.

Data Collection

In this section, I provide details about each of the interviews conducted for this study. I discuss the documents and artifacts collected from each site and the fieldnotes written during (and after) the interviews. Lastly, I share how I went about analyzing the data collected for this study.

Interviews. Each participant was asked to take part in a one-on-one, semi-structured, and audio recorded interview. The goal of this method is to create a

comfortable atmosphere and allow for the flexibility needed to engage participants in meaningful dialogue (almost like a conversation). The interview questions focused on the participants' socialization experiences, academics, athletics, peer groups, aspirations, and officials within the school. The goal for each of these interviews was to provide participants with the opportunity to openly share their experiences as student-athletes in a location that is most convenient for them. As the researcher/interviewer, I tried to present myself as a listener and asked participants to give accounts of their experiences within the phenomenon (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Interview times ranged from 28 minutes to one hour in length and had at least one follow-up email for clarification purposes. Each session was recorded using various digital recording devices (cell phone, iPad, and computer).

Documents and Artifacts. While onsite, I also collected any documents and artifacts (e.g., media guides, school and local newspapers, brochures) that I felt supported the issues that participants discussed during the interviews. Artifacts are “things” or objects in the environment differentiated from documents that represent some form of communication (e.g., official records, newspapers, diaries) (Merriam, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the artifacts and documents that I collected included newspapers, website biographies, social media messages, visitor passes, and schedules. Prior to each interview, participants completed a Demographic Information Sheet for profile purposes (see Appendix D). These artifacts were used to help get a full sense of who the participants were, learn more about their institutions, and better understand their experiences. See Appendix G for an in-depth profile and update on each participant.

Fieldnotes. During the interview process, fieldnotes were taken to document inaudible responses to questions (e.g., facial expressions, discomfort with questions), my experiences, ideas, and “hunches” that emerged during these interactions in the field. Fieldnotes are text (words) recorded by the researcher during an observation in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2008). The goal is that the fieldnotes eventually permit the reader of the findings to experience the activity observed through edited and organized fieldnotes in the report (Patton, 1987). When reviewing the transcripts and developing the thematic structure, the fieldnotes helped to accurately capture the tone and crux of what participants were trying to say.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data-analysis is the process of reviewing, synthesizing and interpreting data to describe and explain the phenomena or social worlds being studied (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). It also involves systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials accumulated during the investigation that enables the researcher to come up with findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Because this study was conducted using the phenomenological approach, additional steps were taken prior to analyzing and coding.

Each interview was individually transcribed using a paid transcription service and yielded 165 pages of data for analysis. Participants were then sent a copy of their transcript and given an opportunity to clarify what was captured. No changes needed to be made. Prior to reading each transcript, I had to put my biases aside during a process called *bracketing*. Bracketing is an intellectual activity in which one tries to put aside

theories, knowledge, and assumptions about a phenomenon (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). For me, this meant that my thoughts about football, intercollegiate sports, the media portrayals, etc. had to be set aside in order to let the thoughts of the participant be his own. Aanstoos said that bracketing is not concerned with ‘forgetting’ everything which is already known by the researcher in relation to the phenomena under investigation, rather, it is about reading the transcripts with an ‘attunement’ to both the factual content of the words and the actual experiences of the participants (as cited in Whiting, 2002). For this study, I (a Black male who has already completed an undergraduate and graduate degree) had to disregard everything I knew (or believed that I knew) about being a Black male college student. This was done so that I could examine the phenomenon with an open mind and absent of any preconceived notions I may have about the phenomenon under investigation. This is achieved by reading and re-reading the transcripts and then identifying areas of the interview which highlight the participants experiences in relation to the phenomena under investigation (Whiting, 2002). This put me in a position to read each transcript, line by line, through a more objective lens than I might otherwise have done.

Prior to the start of the reading of the transcripts and data analysis, however, I switched from the transcendental phenomenological approach used by Moustakas (1994) to the existential approach developed by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997). Rooted in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), Thomas (2003) described the series of steps involved in the Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) method as: (a) setting aside researcher presuppositions about the phenomenon, that is, “bracketing;” (b) in-depth

dialogical interviewing of participants; (c) reading interview transcripts for a sense of the whole; (d) doing line-by-line analysis to identify meaning units and themes; and (e) developing a thematic structure of the experience that is ultimately endorsed as accurate by study participants. Providing verbatim quotations in the research report assists readers in making their own judgments about the rigor of the analysis and the credibility of the interpretations (Thomas, 2003).

To establish reliability, the reader must also be able to see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it (Giorgi, 1975). Transcripts are usually read aloud and discussed in a multidisciplinary research group settings (if the protocol allows for it) to assist in bracketing biases (Thomas, 2003). I was fortunate enough to join such a group and become more familiar with how existential phenomenology is carried out. Our research group consisted of approximately 20 to 30 faculty, staff, and graduate students from multiple disciplines who shared an interest in phenomenological research. It was also beneficial because the developers of this particular approach to phenomenology were present. After carefully reading each transcript multiple times, I began searching for themes that accurately captured what each participant was trying to say about their experiences within the phenomenon under investigation. The term *theme* is used to refer to the patterns that repetitively occur, both within individual transcripts and across all interviews (Thomas, 2003). Whiting (2002) further elaborated this point when he stated that “the theme merely highlights the key issue of each unit as it appears to the naked eye, it does not attempt to relate it to the study or to interpret it’s meaning” (p. 65). The

following section is an in-depth discussion of the findings and each category, which includes verbatim quotes from the participants themselves.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness, I utilized the following procedures: 1) member checking, 2) phenomenological research group, 3) bracketing, and 4) triangulation. Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2008). To accomplish this, each participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript and given the opportunity to review and clarify anything taken out of context (no revisions or corrections had to be made). With the assistance of a phenomenological research group, transcripts were read (line-by-line), analyzed, and a thematic structure was developed. This also assisted in establishing reliability. As discussed in the previous section, I used bracketing to set aside my own presuppositions as a Black male about the phenomenon under investigation (Thomas, 2003). Lastly, triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I used triangulation of multiple data sources (interview transcripts, Participant Information Sheet, team website biography, field notes, and artifacts) to further establish trustworthiness and validity.

Role of the Researcher

During a phenomenological interview, the role of the researcher is to closely track the words of the participant, ensuring that each experience is discussed in detail and

seeking clarification for any statement not fully understood (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The researcher acts as a listener and facilitator of the dialogue. After the initial question is asked, a phenomenological interview proceeds largely under the direction of the participant (Davis et al, 2004). The questions, statements, and summaries used by the interviewer are designed to evoke descriptions, not to confirm hypotheses (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

Summary

This chapter focused on the methods and procedures used during this study. I utilized a qualitative approach because it best suited this investigation and would generate responses from the participants themselves. Phenomenology was employed because it studies the lived experience of participants and [the phenomenon] is examined as it occurs in its natural environment rather than the artificial setting of the laboratory (Thomas, 2003). Interviews took place on the campuses of Eastern Valley State University and Coastal Plains University at times that were convenient for each of the players. Participants were recruited via email communication from advisors. Five participants took part in interviews where they discussed what it was like being a high-achieving Black male football player at a PWI in the South. Interviews were then transcribed by a professional transcription service, reviewed (line-by-line) with a phenomenological research group, and then developed into thematic structures. The next chapter presents the findings and themes.

Chapter 4

Findings

This phenomenological study was designed to investigate the experiences of high achieving Black male college football players. To achieve this goal, semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted with five high achieving Black male football players from two predominantly White Division 1 schools in the South. Findings from interviews with the scholar-athletes are presented in this chapter. Initial data analysis revealed a number of broad themes that emerged from the interview transcripts. However, after sharing these themes (along with verbatim excerpts from a transcript) with the phenomenological research group, I was able to narrow that down to the following themes:

- “That’s What Keeps Me Going”: Motivation to succeed and be a high-achiever
- “It’s Harder Than It Looks”: Stresses of being a student-athlete
- “We’re Not Stereotypical Dummies”: Racial differences and stereotypes

Each theme, along with sub-themes, will be discussed at length in this chapter. Direct quotations from the participants that best support the themes are included. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms will be used when referencing the participant who made the quoted statements.

Theme 1. “That’s What Keeps Me Going”:

Motivation to succeed and be a high-achiever

The first theme highlights the participants’ motivation for success and high-achievement on and off the field. Each participant expressed similar yet unique attributions to the factors that motivated them to achieve in the classroom and on the football field. In some cases it was a parent. In others, it was a difficult circumstance or a negative comment that someone made about their athletic ability. Participants also referred to different individuals who pushed them (in and out of the classroom) and circumstances that fueled their desire to compete on the field and excel in the classroom. This theme is comprised of several sub-themes: *I Have to Prove People Wrong*, *My Momma Says*, *More than Football*, *I Had No Choice*, and *Future Glory*. The findings in this section explicitly address research questions 2 (To whom or what do they attribute their academic and athletic success?) and 3 (What is the relationship between their academic achievement and athletic performance?).

I Have to Prove People Wrong

Having to prove people wrong, or having a chip on the shoulder, emerged as one of the key motivational factors in the experiences of the participants. In classes where they stood out as student athletes, situations where professors didn’t seem to care that they were student athletes, or when people doubted their ability to complete a given task, participants believed they had to prove others wrong. Almost without hesitation, participants described circumstance after circumstance where they were doubted, told they wouldn’t make it, or (in the words of one participant) “hated on.” The actions of

coaches, family members, or influential others in the lives of some participants seemed to have contributed to their perceptions that they had something to prove. Billy, a student-athlete from Coastal Plains University (CPU), expounded on his drive and motivation.

Well, I'm a person that always feels I have to prove someone wrong. Coming from where I come from, man, you got a whole lot of doubters and what you call haters or whatever. And a whole lot of people told me I wouldn't be here, where I'm at right now, so my whole thing is I made it...I guess that's just my drive and motivation.

Participants also held the personal opinions of influential others in high regard and, in most cases, allowed it to fuel their desire to excel. Players expressed sentiments of doubt, being “good enough”, and other forms of negativity. For Parker, a student-athlete at Eastern Valley State University (EVSU), adversity was something that he dealt with his entire life. Because he came from a situation where the odds were stacked against him, doubt from others was the motivation he needed to push himself to succeed. His mother never finished college, was raising him and his siblings as alone, and his father was not present. Parker respects those in authority. But his high school coach made a statement that frustrated him deeply. “My coach told me I wouldn't make it to Division 1. He told my mom, I don't think he's good enough to play Division 3. The next few years, I worked my ass off, got a substantial amount of offers.” At the time of the interview, because of his hard work at EVSU, he had worked his way into an important reserve player role at his position.

Other participants used the skepticism and doubt of others as teachable moments to show how hard they have worked for everything they have achieved as student-athletes. Each participant was a self-described hard-worker and consistently put themselves in positions to succeed in each of their endeavors. “I do work for what I want,” said Oliver (CPU). T’Challa, another student-athlete at CPU, made it clear that he sometimes struggles grasping the material.

You know, a lot of things don’t come easy to me, especially with like academics, how I see like other students, they just know it. Like in the next five minutes or something, they just know it. I’ll be like damn, it takes me two weeks to know something, [laughter] but once I get it, I get it.

Each participant had received academic honors from their respective athletic conferences and was majoring in fields that required extensive effort. One of the most coveted rewards among the participants was being exempt from the mandatory study hall sessions. Study hall NCAA mandated time (8 hours per week during the season and 16 hours per week during the off-season) that is set aside for players to study, do their homework, and get tutoring (if needed). If players meet the GPA requirement for their institutions, they are exempt from mandatory study hall. All five players met the academic requirements to not have to attend mandatory study hall (required a specific GPA and meetings with their academic advisors). The following statements from three best capture the meaning of this experience:

We had a 2.7 minimum GPA to not have study hall. So that kinda encourages me to get good grades so I don't have to mess around with study hall hours and stuff like that. (Charles, EVSU)

For Billy too, getting out of mandatory study hall was a significant accomplishment and became something that he made sure that he continually does.

And coming in school, we had to get in study hall for an hour. And in order to get out, you had to maintain a certain grade point average, and I wanted to hurry up and get out. So *[laughter]* that was a big factor my freshman year. So now I just wanna stay up [keep GPA up] so I won't have to get back in.

Oliver, Billy's other teammate at CPU, also earned his way out of mandatory study hall. The athletics staff seemed to have took notice of his efforts and recognized him for it. He stated,

You have to get over a 3.0 to get out of study hall if you want to get out in one semester. One semester's mandatory, but if you get a 3.0, you can get out. So I got out my first semester, you know, I pushed it. I think I was in there countless hours at times, when it was close to finals. And so they really took note of that.

The study hall is designed to ensure that players "get all of our stuff done", as one participant put it. However, it was also one more agenda item on a daily schedule that was already crowded. When listening to each participant describe the demands on their time, it became very clear that the schedules of student athletes have very busy schedules. Although each player worked hard to not have to attend study hall, they each showed signs of relief and joy in not having to participate anymore. This significant

accomplishment apparently builds momentum in the experiences of these student-athletes.

“My momma says...”

In most cases, players expressed great appreciation for the role that both parents played in their lives. More often than not, however, it was the mothers that received the most praise for the role they played in their sons’ athletic and academic success. With the exception of one participant, the others came from a two-parent household. Throughout the interviews, most of the players continually voiced their appreciation for their mothers or quoted something she said to them. At their lowest points, moments where they felt like cutting corners or giving up, none of them wanted to let their mother down. “If it was up to me, it probably wouldn’t mean as much,” asserted Charles Xavier from EVSU. “Like before she asks about any football, she always talks about my school work. I see how important it is to her, so it becomes important to me.” Parker added:

If I came home with a B, I'd be grounded for about two (weeks) or something...Just because the expectation of what my mom had set. For them [other friends] a C was average. And for me a B was like a C.

While this may come across as excessive or unrealistic to some, none of the participants considered their parental expectations (especially the mothers’) to be extreme or too much pressure. “Growing up, they [parents] never forced me to do anything,” stated Billy. “It was always up to me and my brothers. But I felt like I always wanted to fill their shoes and do what they did,” he further elaborated. These statements seem to

indicate that parental influence (especially from the mother) is important in the experience of these scholar athletes.

More than Football

While success in the classroom kept each player out of mandatory study hall and eligible to play, it was clear that being academically successful was a reward in itself. Both participating institutions provided additional incentives and recognition for the academic success of student athletes. Through the NCAA, the athletic conferences that both institutions compete in also reward players who have shown themselves to be high-achievers in the classroom and on the field. Three of the participants in this study earned such honors within their conference. At EVSU, Charles noted, “you get a little patch on your jersey for getting a 3.0 and that it’s good to be acknowledged for your accomplishments in the classroom as well as the field.” For one participant, the significance of athletic and academic achievement puts a positive spotlight on student-athletes. “I just want to be great at my field of what I do academically and athletically, because not many people can do that at the same time”, says Parker. To these players, academic success goes beyond just football. One player said there is a “joy behind getting good grades.” Another player said “success means everything to me in classes.” The following reflection from T’Challa summed it up best:

I just love to learn different things. So success in the classroom of course it’s getting A’s and B’s, but really walking out of the classroom at the end of the school year knowing that I learned something. I understand something. I can

apply this to my life, or maybe teach somebody else whatever material I was taught. (T'Challa, CPU)

These players seem to have an appreciation for competing as scholars as well as athletes. The discipline required for success on the football field looks as if it translates to the classroom as well. It also appears that emphasizing scholastic achievement can have a positive impact on morale and development.

I Had No Choice

In addition to their success going beyond just football and having very supportive mothers in their corner, one of the experiences that continued to stand out was how success was not optional for these participants. Whether it was the expectations set by parents, the institution, or themselves, success seemed to be the only option. As previously stated, none of the participants described their parental expectations as pressure-filled or stressful. For instance, Oliver stated, “They [parents] were always on me about my grades.” Charles did not want to play football in the first place as he expressed with a smile on his face, “I really didn’t like football that much. I actually used to cry before every season and tell him [his dad] [he didn’t want to play]. And he said, it’s best for me. So I’m glad I listened to him.” In addition to support, these scholar athletes were expected to not only go to college, but to be successful in all they do.

Oliver shared the following thoughts on his parent’s expectations:

Their biggest thing was [referring to his parents], “You're not gonna miss a homework assignment. You're not gonna fail a test.” That's their whole thing. They would go in before the first day of school started, both of 'em at the same

time. They would just basically tell the teacher, “If you need to call me or contact me in any way about anything feel free. Don't hesitate. I'll fly down in a minute.”

And one day my dad actually flew down for a surprise visit. Yeah. I hated it back then, but I respect it now.

In order to get into the institution, the players must first earn a certain score on a standardized test, exhibit superior athletic prowess on the football field, get recruited, and graduate from high school (sometimes early, which is the case for some participants). On top of that, in order to be eligible to play, the participants also had academic requirements to fulfill along with their athletic obligations. Failure in any of the previously mentioned areas would've had significant ramifications on the participants' chances of getting into their current institutions.

Each of the participants' parents had some form of post-secondary education, some who were student-athletes themselves. Those experiences, coupled with the desire for their children to excel, served as a catalyst for the success of each of the participants. While quitting may have crossed the participants' minds, it was never something that any of them ever did. Both of Billy Batson's parents were student-athletes in college. His father also played in the NFL. And while his parents never forced any of their three boys to “follow in their footsteps”, success (in and out of the classroom) was a top priority to his parents. In regards to who or what influenced his decision to play sports in the first place, Billy said:

I felt like I always wanted to fill their (his parents) shoes and do what they did and kind of go along the same paths they did. It was something I started when I was

real younger. And as I began to grow up, it was just something that grew on me, and I just started to love it. It started to be important to me, and it's something I started to take serious. (Billy, CPU)

In regards to his academic success, Billy's parents also made it clear that "You're going to go to college." He further added that, "I didn't really have too much of a, too much of a decision. Of course, it's something they, they really pushed strong on us." So the impact of the parent's attending college was a big factor too. However, Parker's mother and T'Challa's father did not attend college.

After College (Post college plans)

Each participant openly discussed their plans for life after college and, in some cases, that was football. Almost without hesitation, participants talked about how nice it would be to play in the NFL. With a huge smile on his face, Charles said "I want to go the NFL. That's like my number one goal right now." And based on recent NFL scouting reports, he is already a top prospect for the 2016 NFL draft. Each of the other participants expressed similar sentiments about making it to the NFL. However, they did so with more reservations than Charles. Although each participant was optimistic about their individual athletic ability, all but one made it clear that the NFL is not their only goal. Parker said, "I would like to get drafted, but you know how that is." Billy added, "one goal I think every athlete has is to go to the next level, the pro level. However, it's not my only goal." His teammate (T'Challa) further added, "a lot of people say, well the NFL. My life wouldn't be over if I didn't go into the NFL." Oliver summed it best with this statement:

If I had to choose football or academics, it would definitely be academics. If I make it to the NFL then that would be great. That would be a wonderful experience. But when it comes to it, academics has to be your plan A because if you get hurt, what are you gonna lean on? So I've always been academics then athletics type of person. (Oliver, CPU)

Charles was the only player that made it clear the NFL was his primary goal. "I want to get a job that I like doing. I don't want to be in a desk job." Despite his success in the classroom and the fact that he believed EVSU was preparing him for success in his major, playing professional football was a goal that his sights have remained set on.

Other participants expressed desires to be successful in vocations within their respective majors. To them, football was a means to an end that allowed them achieve all of their goals. Billy wanted to do something with his life and "something other than sports." "I really wanna do something with some type of broadcasting job or something like that." Oliver, not surprisingly, expressed the most ambitious of desires when he said, "I wanna go to med school. I always wanted to be a cardiologist." His ambition matched his competitive drive on the field and in the classroom. As a result of having ambitions other than sports, this led to the players taking advantage the resources and opportunities that being a student athlete afforded them. Each player believed that their institutions were preparing them for success while they were in school and once they leave (by graduation or via the NFL). Billy concluded, "some of the people that has been here [at CPU] in the past, they've been able to succeed outside of football and they got the same education I got." T'Challa added that "football, my schoolwork, and this campus ministry

that I'm a part of is equipping me and molding me to becoming the person that I'm going to be in the next couple of years." Given the focus, commitment to excellence, and self-motivation shown by these athletes, it came as no surprise that these were the young men were viewed as team leaders and selected by their counselors to participate in this study.

As seen throughout Theme 1, Black male scholar-athletes attribute their success to a variety of sources. In some cases it's the very high expectations (their own and those belonging to others). Given the support, resources needed for success, and some self-confidence, these young men will meet (and often exceed) those expectations. In other cases, it's the desire to prove others wrong. Channeled appropriately, high-achievers like the players in this study will use doubts and negativity to challenge themselves for the better. It's also important these young men to have ambitions beyond football. If football is a means to an end, like it was with the participants in this study, then not making it to the NFL will not be devastating. Lastly, with a balanced perspective on academics and athletics, high-achieving Black male football players provide a different image to Black males still in K-12 settings.

Theme 2. "It's Harder Than It Looks":

Stresses of Being A Student-Athlete

The stresses of being a student-athlete emerged as a second major experience of being a high-achieving Black male student athlete. To fully comprehend the participants' experiences, one must take into consideration the physical demands (body), limitation of time, schedule controlled by entities other than themselves (others), travel, etc. As one participant indicated, "you won't really understand unless you go through it." When

discussing the stresses associated with being a student-athlete, participants continually used words and phrases like “it’s tough,” “it sucks,” “it’s hard,” “hard to balance,” etc. In addition to these difficulties, players had to deal with the external stresses that come with their non-athlete peers, general public perception (include professors, faculty, and staff), and others that project their misguided beliefs about student-athletes onto them. Responses in this section provide answers to the research questions one (How do high-achieving Black male football players describe their experiences in and out of academic settings?).

The Downs

A very critical aspect of the student-athlete experience, or athletes in general, is having to deal with injuries. Because of the physical nature of the game of football, players are having to work harder than ever to take care of their bodies. That’s one of the reasons why the head coaches at both institutions invested heavily in the emerging field of Sports Science. Through this method of data analysis and performance management, everything the athlete does is monitored closely to reduce fatigue and injury during activities. Everything from the players’ diets, movements, fluid intake, heat exhaustion, etc. is monitored via computer. Other than Oliver (who had suffered a serious concussion that sidelined him for a game during the previous season), each participant was either on crutches, wearing a boot, and/or still in recovery from various injuries at the time of the interview.

Oliver noted that “football has its ups and downs.” The “downs” have almost everything to do with the injuries players suffer while in practice or during a game. For

these players, injuries (regardless of when they occur) deal a devastating blow student-athletes. This was the case with Charles. “My last year got cut short because I tore my ACL. Besides that, I was about to blow up [have a great season] last year,” he said. Charles had received academic and conference honors. He was on the way to having a standout season until his injury occurred. Similar situations occurred with the other four participants as well. Parker hurt his leg (which ended his summer training), Billy tore his ACL (which ended his season), T’Challa injured his shoulder (which ended his season), and Oliver suffered a devastating concussion (which sidelined him for a week). It must also be noted that four of the five participants suffered multiple game and season-ending injuries during the season following these interviews.

What must also be taken into consideration is that football is a revenue-generating sport and that college football is a billion-dollar industry. Bowl game earnings, sponsorships, jersey sales of star players, concessions, alumni/corporate donors, and television revenue all contribute to the business of college football. Because of the business side of things, it’s also very easy to forget that injuries can very easily put the future of these young men in serious jeopardy. This can lead to players losing their spots in the starting rotation, reduction in playing time, being replaced by a big-name recruit, or even loss of a scholarship. While sidelined because of an injury, players often miss out on the team meetings, travel with the team, and other team functions because of recovery and/or rehabilitation obligations. T’Challa’s experience with his injury best reflects this situation.

Last year, I watched film with the guys in my position. This semester I haven't gotten a chance to because our time is so limited throughout the day. We only get 24 hours. So the time I wanna go watch film, I have to go to do rehab. So it's like do I watch film or rehab? I gotta rehab so I can get back on the field. So I'm missing valuable time watching film so I can get ready for Spring ball in the season. I had to make a sacrifice for that. I know a lot of students they don't know that, you know? They don't know what we're doing, what we gotta go through. (T'Challa, CPU)

For Oliver, his injury (albeit brief) brought on a period of serious reflection and appreciation for the game of football. In fact, this was the portion of his interview where he showed a little emotion.

My first concussion, was out a game, and it made me realize, did I take the game for granted even a week? Maybe it's God showing me just don't take the game for granted. I hated watching my team play.

Both Oliver's and T'Challa's, demonstrate how difficult it is for players to miss playing time and the mental aspects of playing football. These statements also seem to indicate that injuries can put players in long-term jeopardy at their positions.

Participants also spoke somewhat emotionally about the difficulties of trying to balance the demands of being a student and athlete. Team meetings, press conferences, Spring practices, Fall training camps, the list goes on. On top of that, they still have to attend classes, purchase textbooks, complete assignments, and meet the requirements of being a student as well. The life of these student athletes is very demanding. Oliver said

loudly, “It’s hard. Man, it’s hard, I’m tellin you.” Participants often talked about the need to “catch my breath” in class or deal with those moments where it seemed like “football was more important.” Although each participant expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to receive an education and play football, none of them hesitated to share the difficulties associated with this privilege. Charles said, “It’s very hard to balance both of them, especially after a hard day at practice.” Because of his major, Oliver said that most of the time, “it sucks.”

Another thing that’s often missing from the negative press against student-athletes is that these young men are still human beings with lives outside of football. They too experience the same life challenges (i.e.- illness, parental divorce, financial issues, etc.). T’Challa talked at-length about how student athletes experience more adversity than students who do not participate in intercollegiate athletics. He added:

I think we’ll probably go through more adversity than regular students. My old team chaplain said we’re always gonna go through a storm. Either you’re already in the storm, or you’re coming out of it. It’s inevitable that we’re gonna go through some kind of storm, that’s life. Then again, you have adversity as a student, and then you have adversity as a student athlete. You know, you might get a phone call saying, “Hey, uh –your grandmother passed away,” you know? Just situations like that, and then you have to deal with that, and then you have to deal with not getting playing time. Then you have to deal with the classes that you’re not doing well in. (T’Challa, CPU)

T'Challa's statement indicates that student athletes are non-traditional students in the sense that they are confronted with more responsibilities than what he called "regular" students. Not only do they have to deal with the demands of an athletic and academic schedule, they have to deal with the demands of everyday life. So resiliency and persistence seem to be important characteristics of these high-achievers.

Many football players (especially top recruits) graduate high school a semester early so that they can get acclimated to college life sooner, adjust to the physical demands and speed of college football, and participate in the Spring practices (Canner-O'Mealy & Mahoney, 2009; Carey, 2013). While their friends back home are getting ready for prom, still operating on a bell schedule, and having fun, they're on a college campus still trying to adjust. Often, participants are still under the age of 18 when they arrive on campus. For some participants, this transition proved to be challenging. "That was hard for me. I was still in the mindset of a high school student. I didn't how I was gonna adjust so fast," said Oliver.

In addition to the external demands they faced each day, participants also had to deal the internal stressors vying for their time. While the high-achievers were using their time to take care of their academic obligations, their teammates may be using their time differently (i.e.-choosing athletic priorities over academic ones). "We're all trying to fight to get playing time or trying to be successful in the books", asserted T'Challa. With the time they were allotted, participants found unique ways to manage it. For some, it's a matter of "time management" or planning. For others, it's about "making myself study."

In either case, it seems that the ability to prioritize and manage time are vital components in the experiences of these players.

While talking to one participant about the struggles of being a student-athlete, he brought up the notion of player compensation for college athletes (which has been a controversial debate over the last few years). For some time now, student-athlete compensation has been at the forefront of NCAA discussions. Ed O'Bannon, former power forward for the UCLA Bruins, filed a lawsuit against the NCAA for using his image on television and video games without his permission or compensation (Feldman, 2014). In 2014, football players at Northwestern University filed a union petition citing that scholarship players were employees and that (like other workers) they had the right to form a union and receive benefits (Strauss, 2014). Yet, year-after year, the NCAA continually defends the need for amateurism. In a 2014 interview with PBS, NCAA President Mark Emmert stated, "The most fundamental notion is that student-athletes are not paid professionals. They are students who are playing for their school. They are not there because they're being paid" (Stauffer, 2014). Charles offered this counter statement:

If a normal student went through what we went through, I don't think there's anybody that wouldn't agree that we should be getting paid. And a lot of people just don't know like what we've got to go through; in fact, they have no idea. Like, I just couldn't see anybody going through [this] and feeling the same way.
(Charles, EVSU)

Charles was referring to the conversation about college athletes not being paid. He was saying that if people really understood what they had to endure on a daily basis, it's doubtful that anyone would still say they should not be compensated for their efforts. Hopefully, findings from this study (and similar future studies) will lead to a data-driven discussion about this.

Lastly, the athletes spoke at length about the necessity of having people around that understand what they are going through. Having to go to class after getting in late from a game and limited physical mobility due to injury are just a few scenarios that could lead to players being late for or missing class. The athletes continually referred to professors and other students who actually take the time to get to know them, see that they are "overwhelmed," "tired," and have a hectic schedule. "It definitely means they understand," Billy commented. "For a teacher just to understand the process and understand what you're going through, it makes life a whole lot easier as a student-athlete." This statement suggests that having university personnel (esp. professors) that understand are vital to the academic success of student athletes.

Fortunately, none of the participants allowed the downside of their experience to hinder their ability to achieve in the athletic and academic domains. Each player, in their own unique fashion, figured out how to endure and adapt. Billy motivates himself by saying, "do it for myself and do it for my family. Each day I wake up. Some days I don't wanna go to class. Some days I don't feel like studying. But, I just try to think of things like that." Oliver put it simply, "you gotta roll with the punches." This theme of resiliency and adaptation appeared throughout the interviews.

This section focused on the difficulties experienced by the scholar-athletes in this study. Players indicated that it's not as easy as it looks and that there are "downs" associated with being a football player. Players have to deal with injuries, go to class when exhausted, deal with life issues, and still find a way to stay motivated and study. Overall, the participants continued to find ways to persist and "roll with the punches." The next section will address how the players deal with racism and stereotypes on their campuses.

Theme 3. "We're Not Stereotypical Dummies":

Racial Differences and Stereotypes

The third theme relates to the racial differences and stereotypes that participants had observed at their respective institutions. In every interview, participants noted the various racial encounters they experienced and the stereotypical sentiments expressed by their peers and others. Whether it was in the classroom, in conversation with their non-athlete peers, or somewhere off campus (i.e.- a nightclub), the players believed that there were always eyes on them and that everyone had their own preconceived notions about who they are, their intentions, and what they actually experience. Add these occurrences along with being Black males as well, and you have an environment that could prove to be hostile for these student-athletes. However, each player found his own unique way to address racism and stereotypes when the opportunity presented itself. Some went so far as to propose solutions that would open doors for increased communication among athletes and the public. Sub-themes in section include *The Magnifying Glass*, *The Looks*, *the Comments*, and *Break those Stereotypes*. Responses in this theme provide additional

answers to research question one (How do high-achieving Black male football players describe their experiences in and out of academic settings?).

The Magnifying Glass

Previously, each of the participants expressed that they had something to prove- a chip on their shoulders (if you will). That sentiment is carried over into this area because none of the players wanted to be associated with the stereotypes levied against them. “Being at a big school like this that’s predominantly White, being a black student, it’s like a magnifying glass is looked at us (especially being a student athlete),” noted T’Challa. It’s something that is often difficult for them to escape because of how recognizable they are on campus (this is something that I can personally attest to being that I am employed at a predominantly White Division 1 institution in the south with a nationally recognized football team). “They recognize us as athletes more than they do the White people [White players on the team],” replied Charles when asked if Black athletes are treated differently than athletes from other racial backgrounds. Even in off-campus settings, players are mindful of what their status as student-athletes brings them (good and bad attention). Charles explained, “like trying to get in a club, they’ll let the Black athletes skip line, and like they won’t even notice [the white athlete with them]. They think he’s just a regular student.” Because of social media and cell phone cameras, these must exercise caution as well. It’s the exercising of caution that Oliver’s father refused to let him have a Twitter account (he was later allowed to get one months after this interview). “Dad wouldn’t let me have a Twitter ‘cause a lotta people get in trouble with it, especially students that haven’t even gone to college yet but they lose

scholarships.” It must be noted that only two of the five participants had active Twitter accounts at the time of the interviews.

This sub-theme highlighted the feeling of being under a magnifying glass for the players in this study. Whether it’s on campus or off-campus, the players indicated that they were very much aware of the racial differences between them and White players. More importantly, they perceive that they are being looked at closely and that there is nowhere for them to just be themselves. Participants also expressed the feeling of being more recognizable than their White teammates has its advantages and disadvantages. The next sub-theme will talk more about the looks and comments the participants get while under the magnifying glass.

The Looks and the Comments

Whether it’s their tattoos, physical size, or recognition because of various media outlets (social media, local television, campus media, etc.), participants noted that they get a lot of looks and attention when they enter a room. In academic settings, some participants believed the looks they get when they walk into a classroom make them feel as though they are incapable of being in that class, yet alone succeeding in it. In some cases, players perceived the expectation that they were “stereotypical dummies” and “don’t really have to go to class.” Players often found themselves having to defend their intelligence as well as their status as Black male student athletes. “Student-athletes in general are always stereotyped coming into a college. If you’re black, then it’s even probably worse,” says T’Challa. The statements below best capture this experience for the participants.

I get a lot of looks, and, and, and especially by girls or teachers, that we're like, "Oh, you just think I'm just an athlete." Until they read my paper I write or my thesis and then they start to take me a little more seriously. Especially even girls. I mean, I don't know if you've ever had this problem. Girls will be like, "Oh, you're just a athlete or whatever. (Parker, EVSU)

It must be noted that Parker is bi-racial, has a lot of tattoos, and wears his hair in a mohawk. And he is by no means a small guy. So when he walks into a room, not only is he recognizable. It's also very hard to miss him. When members of the opposite sex talk to him and realize that he is an athlete, his intellectual ability is called into question. This experience is consistent with one of the studies mentioned in the review of literature. In the following example, T'Challa speaks about the assumptions White students make when they see a Black student walk into a classroom at his institution.

The school is predominantly white. When they see a black student walk into a classroom, they automatically assume, "okay, he's an athlete." And I've talked to a lot of black students that are not athletes, and they say, they say they've encountered a lot of students ask them, "hey, what sport do you play?" And they don't play any sport. And, and so it's like, wow. So, so pretty much, they get – they're kind of surprised, like, "Wow, you're smart enough to be here?"

Statements like T'Challa's are unfortunate and indicate that even as high-achievers (on and off the field), it is very difficult for students to be taken seriously as scholars. Their academic ability is consistently challenged and their very presence at the institution can only be justified by athletic pursuits. More importantly, T'Challa's example shows that

even Black males who are non-athletes (at least at CPU) must endure the scrutiny from their peers as well. In this next example, Oliver described the experience of simply mentioning his major and people (especially girls) being surprised.

I've been in predominantly White schools, so it's not far from the norm for me being the only African American in the class, or close to it with only having two or three. So when I walked in, people usually kinda – they'll give me that look, and then when they see that I'm an athlete and I'll have like on a letterman's jacket or my nametag will show that I'm a football player, they'll be like, "Wow." If I just talk to a girl and they'll say, "Hey, what's your major?" "Biology," and she's like, "Hmm, wow." That really catches people by surprise.

Oliver's statement shows that some students have the perception that athletes are supposed to major in something other traditionally challenging courses like Biology, Math, or Chemistry. If an athlete happens to be in one of those courses, as is the case with Oliver, he is viewed as an exception or catches people by surprise. Based on the comments of these players, it seems that being taken seriously, viewed as a fellow student, and not having their academic ability questioned is something that is lacking in their experience.

Break Those Stereotypes

It was very troubling to see that each of the participants had come to the conclusion that stereotypes were a normal part of their experience as student-athletes. For some players, the perception was that student-athletes are always stereotyped, especially at predominantly White institutions. Most of the perceptions they described

were very negative and did not show them in a positive light. As a result, the athletes are confronted with yet another obstacle to overcome. Charles described a situation where if you heard about a student-athlete getting in trouble, he believed it would likely be a Black male. T'Challa proposed having a class or an organization that helps student-athletes (Black males specifically) transition to college and not feel “thrown into the woods.”

Despite the negativity that they experience, participants proposed solutions that would bring all sides together to discuss the way to “break” the stereotypes they are confronted with each day. Instead of having attitudes of hostility, outrage, or bitterness, participants in this study suggested creating opportunities for dialogue that would help to inform their Caucasian counterparts about their experiences and who they are as individuals. “We’re not the stereotypical dummies,” noted Oliver. He also proposed “getting together as a group” (with other White students) to discuss what they all can do for the community and the school to tear down stereotypes. The aim here is not to “show up” one group or the other. Rather, it is an effort to get other people to see that they are more intellectual than “just athletes” or just Black people in general.

This section focused on how participants experienced racism and stereotypes at their particular institutions. Players felt like they were viewed through a magnifying glass and were more easily identifiable than their White teammates. They also believed that each time they entered a room they were getting looks and that their intellectual ability was in a constant state of questioning and doubt among their peers. More importantly, the participants’ very presence at EVSU and CPU could only be justified by

athletic participation (not their academic ability). Lastly, participants discussed suggestions, ideas, and a desires to break the stereotypes that existed about them. The next section will provide a comprehensive summary of my findings.

Summary of Findings

The primary research question guiding this study asked, what are the experiences of high-achieving Black male football players at predominantly White Division I schools in the South? As discussed in this chapter, high-achieving Black male football players attributed their success to a variety of sources. The need to prove others wrong, rewards for succeeding in the classroom, not having to attend study hall, and having a supportive family (especially the mother) were all described as factors that were vital to the academic success of the participants. Participants in this study believe that they are being prepared for life after college, whether it's in the NFL or doing something within their majors.

The experience of being a Black male football player is much harder than it looks. Injuries prevented some of the participants from finishing the football season and hindered the off-season development for the others. Dealing with the stresses of a demanding schedule, balancing the student-athlete role, and having to cope with life issues outside of football were also identified as necessary components in the experiences of the participants. Developing the ability to adapt, manage time, and prioritize commitments uniquely position the athletes to succeed in each of their required domains.

High-achieving Black male football players value being understood and the ability to be related to by others (especially their instructors). When the participants are

understood, they feel more connected to their peers and instructors. Having someone who understands what they go through and is able to relate also makes the players feel a better sense of belonging and not like they are stereotyped. Moreover, if instructors, administrators, and students understood what high-achieving Black male football players go through, they would be less-likely to make uninformed comments and opinions about the student-athlete experience.

Lastly, the participants in this student are also fully aware of the racism, stereotypes, and racial differences that exist on their respective campuses. Players expressed feeling like they were under a magnifying glass, looked at differently, and were watched closer than their White peers because they are more easily identifiable. However, they refuse to let it deter them from their goals. Each of them chose to acknowledge the challenges that racism, prejudice, and stereotyping presents. In fact, rather than giving in to pressures, participants in this study proposed solutions would provide their peers (and others who work with student-athletes on a consistent basis) the opportunity to get to know them as individuals and get a better understanding of what they experience on a daily basis. They also resist the urge to underperform and choose to excel so that others can see that not all student athletes are “dumb jocks.”

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Five Black male football players from two Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) were investigated in this phenomenological study. Each participant was on a full athletic scholarship, had a GPA above 3.0, was an upperclassman, and a starter in his respective position (or an important reserve player). This chapter provides a brief summary of the study, including the research design and the key findings. Also, a discussion concerning the academic, athletic, and social experiences of each participant is included in this chapter. Implications for university athletic administrators, faculty, parents, coaches, and university administrators are presented. Finally, recommendations for future studies on Black male student athletes are offered.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the experiences of high achieving Black male football players at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South. Researchers have taken an active interest in the educational achievement of Black male student athletes for years (Beamon, 2009; Benson, 2000, Comeaux, 2008; Comeaux, Taustine, & Harrison, 2011; Donnor, 2005; Edwards, 2000; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Harrison, 2002; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Lapchick, 1988; Martin, 2005; Singer, 2005). To date, most of these studies have almost exclusively looked at elite institutions, focused on another region of the country or athletic conference, examined multiple sports (not just revenue-generating sports), or not exclusively concentratng on high-achievers. In previous years, the academically

successful Black male student-athlete had been non-existent in the higher education literature (Martin, 2005). This study is an attempt to expand on previous literature by adding the experiences of Black male football players from predominantly White Division 1 institutions in the South.

Discussion

Previous research has closely examined the achievement and experiences of Black males in higher education (Caldwell, Sewell, Parks, & Toldson, 2009; Cuyjet, 1997; Garibaldi, 1992; Harper, 2005; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Robertson & Mason, 2008). While findings from these studies address achievement of Black males from a wellness, non-deficit, standards-based, and action-based perspective, several gaps still exist. A lot of what is written in the majority of studies about Black males is written from deficit perspective and, as previously mentioned, only highlights their shortcomings. More than two-thirds of all Black males who begin college never finish. This and a legion of other discouraging facts about Black males are the usual headlines (Harper, 2005). This study focused on what Black males (student athletes in particular) are doing right, what they believe makes them successful, and described what it's like to be Black male football players at their respective institutions. Toby Jenkins (2006) stated the following:

The challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing Black men is daunting and requires working on the plight of the individual and transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America.

By choosing a non-deficit perspective, I'm confident that these findings will shed a positive light on Black male football players, further the discussions that impact them most, and provide insight into we can do to develop systems that best support them.

The aim of a phenomenological study is to provide a faithful description of the whole unified gestalt of participants' experiences, highlighting themes that are figural as contextualized by the four existential grounds of human life (body, time, others, and world) (Thomas, 2003). It is because of what we do not know about Black male student-athletes and how they experience college (Messer, 2006) that this study is relevant. By allowing Black male student-athletes to describe their experiences (in their own words) will give valuable insight retention committees and those in charge invested in the academic success of Black male student-athletes (and Black male student in some cases). As such, it was important for me to make sure that I captured the participants' experiences as they described it. Overall, their experiences as high achieving Black male football players were a very positive one. Participants believed they had a tremendous opportunity and wanted make the most of it (in and out of the classroom). I believe that the findings will also have important implications for designing program and policies to help Black student-athletes enrolled at predominantly white institutions improve their academic performance (Comeaux, 2008).

The perspectives offered by the participants in this study benefits more than just Black males who participate in intercollegiate sports. Black male students—both in high school and college—have the most to gain from this project, as it presents qualitative reflections of their high-achieving brothers' experiences (Harper, 2003). Participants

shared what keeps them motivated and how to overcome adversity. As previously noted, just because they are high achievers do not mean that they won't endure hardships and challenges along the way. Each participant in this study spoke at length of the difficulties of being a student athlete and what they have to do to balance it all. Hard work, focus, and self-determination are important traits for high achieving student athletes to possess and be able to develop. More importantly, they are living embodiments of how to successfully prioritize athletics without neglecting academic responsibilities.

The portrayal of Black males in the media needs to be more positive as well. A lot of Black males believe that the only way they can "make it" is through professional sports or some other form of entertainment. Highlighting a diversity of successful role models beyond recognizable music and film entertainers and sport figures will do much to help increase the awareness of the importance of balancing sport and academic pursuits (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008). Any mention of their academic success or value to society is rarely illustrated (Jackson & Moore, 2008). The media bombards us with endless articles and vignettes about how Black athletes had little going for them until they found, or were found by, sport (Harris, 1997). This study aimed to present more positive images and offer more balanced views of academic and athletic excellence. The Black family and the larger community have a responsibility to encourage other avenues of success beyond sports and emphasize the high probability that sports will not be the avenue toward success for the vast majority of student athletes (Beamon, 2009). Participants in this study came from families that placed more emphasis on academic achievement than athletics. They, along with their parents, made

athletic pursuits secondary to their academic requirements. Until we rethink our assumptions of student-athletes and provide more rigorous expectations and avenues for success negative characterizations and negative press are all likely to ensue (Oseguera, 2010).

With regard to achievement in the academic and athletic domains, Weiner's (1986) attribution theory best aligned with the perceived causes of success and failure stated by the participants. All three dimensions of causality (locus, stability, and controllability) affect a variety of common emotional experiences, including anger, gratitude, guilt, hopelessness, pity, pride, and shame (Weiner, 1986). In the present study, attributions made by the participants would be considered unstable because they believed that their efforts brought about a change. Controllability was also evident in the present study because the successes of each participant was controlled by the participants based on the amount of effort put forth on their tasks (Swinton et al., 2011). Each of the participants attributed their success to their internal motivation, hard work, encouragement from family and friends, and future glory (i.e.- making it to the NFL). People with an internal locus of control credit their success and failures to what they did as an individual (i.e.- hard work). In contrast, people with an external locus of control attribute their success and failures to sources beyond their control (i.e.- other people). Thus, it's reasonable to claim that the participants in this study possess both an internal and external locus of control.

Participants were also aware of the stereotypes they faced as Black males, football players, and high achievers. Steele proposed (1997) that negative stereotypes about the

intellectual ability of Black students might result in their academic underperformance through their fear of confirming these negative stereotypes. In other words, some students (in the presence of a stereotype they are aware of) will choose to underperform. Thankfully, none of the participants in this study succumbed to the pressures of stereotype threat. In fact, they chose to use incidents where they were being stereotyped or where their peers were openly sharing negative viewpoints about student athletes as teachable moments. According to Aronson and George (2003), stereotypes of Blacks and other non-Whites are transferred into our educational institutions and classrooms. Participants referred to instances where their intellect was questioned simply because they were student athletes. Although they may not make their beliefs public, educators bring their own cultural beliefs and expectations into schools and it is through the lens of these beliefs that they assess students' abilities, judge their potential for achievement, and help decide their futures by opening or closing doors (Aronson & George, 2003). Fortunately, the high achievers reported mostly positive relationships and interactions with faculty. This ability to perform and achieve, despite the presence of stereotypes, is vital for the understanding and achievement of these high achieving students.

Implications

Results from this study offer practical implications for several key groups. One of the key aims of this study was to identify strategies and resources that could be replicated and used to improve the experiences and educational outcomes for future Black male students (in general) as well as student athletes. The following recommendations are offered to assist parents, P-12 educators, university administrators, and university faculty.

Parents

As seen throughout this study, familial support and influence plays a critical role in the experience of high-achieving Black male football players. Sports sociologists have noted that family, including parents and siblings, is the earliest and most influential socializing agent into sports participation (Beamon, 2009). Because the parents in this study consistently emphasized academic endeavors over athletics from an early age, these young men were well-rounded and well-prepared for life at a predominantly White Division I school in the South. Each participant knew that, regardless of how difficult things were, they were able to turn to their parents during their time of need.

Secondly, parents that have actually attended college should have regular conversations with their sons as early as possible about college life. For the exception one participant, each of the parents had at least one parent that had some form of postsecondary education. In a few cases, some of the parents attended predominantly White Division I institutions (just not in the South). Because of this, the parents were living examples of what a college education brings (and what a lack thereof does not bring). Their experiences college made talking about college life with their sons, which schools to choose, and how to be successful much easier. Participants described not having a choice about going to college. Despite the lack of choice, none of the participants viewed this expectation as stressful or pressuring.

Lastly, parents should also put more emphasis on academic success (especially in Black families). Participation and/or interest in sport by parents is often one of the antecedents of sport participation by children (Harris, 1994). While there is nothing

wrong with participation in athletics, there needs to be more celebration and praise for academic accomplishments. For instance, when high school players sign their National Letter of Intent (NLI), it's televised on ESPN-U. Participants in this study talked about the rewards given to them by the institution and their respective athletic conferences when they do well academically. If more attention were given to that, I believe more student athletes would likely strive for it as well.

P-12 educators

Because all students are required to spend at least 12-13 years in school, prior to their postsecondary education, P-12 educators play a vital role in the growth and development of high achieving Black males. Findings from this study indicate that Black student-athletes tend to increase the likelihood of college academic success to the extent that they show academic promise and worth while in high school (Comeaux, 2008). Participants described experiences during their P-12 tenure that later shaped who they are today. That's why P-12 educators should set high expectations and equip them with the tools necessary to reach them. When each of these young men are recruited, accept their scholarships, and show up on campus, the expectations are extremely high. We are not preparing our young men for success (on or off the field) when we fail to set high expectations, don't hold them accountable, and just let them get by.

Participants also talked about teachers, coaches, and other school personnel who did something that impacted them. In most cases this was a positive experience. Educators, coaches, and other sport leaders should do more to highlight positive athletic and nonathletic role models (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008). I believe the

earlier this occurs in the life of student athletes, especially Black males, the more likely they will be to succeed in that setting (and beyond). Therefore, P-12 institutions and educators need to establish learning environments where the expectations are clear and set very high. These settings should also be staffed with individuals who can relate and are willing to invest the necessary time to preparing these young men for success academically. It is important to highlight the academic success of Black youth as ardently as is often done for athletic triumph more publicly displayed in sport arenas and stadiums (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008). More importantly, P-12 educators should demonstrate and emphasize the benefits of academic success.

University Administrators and Faculty

If you look at the hectic schedule, physical exertion, and unbelievable pressure student athletes have to endure, you would notice very quickly that their experience is nothing like a traditional undergraduate student. In fact, I would argue that referring to student athletes as non-traditional students is more fair and accurate. Through all the interviews, participants talked about how different things are for their peers who don't have to endure the stresses they do each day. They also talked about how frustrating it can be to have to listen to someone (who has no idea what they deal with) glamorize their experience. Rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, the challenge is to establish learning environments and socialization patterns that are tailored to norms, values, and behaviors of the student (Comeaux, 2008). Black student-athletes matriculating to PWIs may be especially susceptible to low levels of adjustment to college if steps are not taken to make the college environment more hospitable,

welcoming, and nurturing for them (Melendez, 2008). University administrators should work to create an environment where the *student* in student athlete gets more emphasis, especially since universities generate revenue from football programs.

The participants in this study were driven to succeed on the field and in the classroom. Each participant utilized tutoring and the advising resources provided by the Athletic Academic Support offices on their campuses. However, these offices do not have individuals that players can talk to about mental health issues, risky behaviors (i.e.- binge drinking, casual sex, etc.) in a non-punitive and judgment-free space. Several participants in this study expressed gratitude for being able to sit down and talk about their experience. They enjoyed being able to have an honest conversation about this experience and being able to say what they would like to see differently. Universities should work hard to provide time, personnel, and space for their athletes to be able to safely vent their concerns without fear of repercussion.

Faculty and academic staff need to be more involved in the athletic recruiting process so that student-athletes will feel they are valued as students as well as athletes (Simons, Van Rheenen, & Covington, 1999). This could lead to increased dialogue between faculty, staff, and student athletes. More importantly, this could help each party better understand the experiences of the other. Black personnel at the university who are familiar with the struggles of Black students at PWIs and willing to assist as mentors may be a key component to bridging the isolation gap for Black students and student-athletes (Melendez, 2008). Players in this study expressed a desire to be understood by their instructors. Due to travel requirements, dealing with injuries, and complex schedules,

players may run late or have to miss class. So that faculty better understand what football players do, some schools have developed “Honorary Coach” experiences (which I’ve had the privilege of participating in) that give faculty and staff an inside look into the inner workings of the football program. Honorary Coaches get to sit on quarterback meetings, attend practice, and stand on the sideline during the game. Participants in this experience usually come away with a new perspective on intercollegiate athletics. Such an experience could also lead to faculty and administrators better understanding what the Black males in this study experience.

Universities should also continue to work to diversify the faculty and staff, especially in the head coaching position. Black males make up the majority of athletic teams but constitute a minority across campus. In 2012, of the 124 Division 1-A college football schools, only 15 had African American coaches (Lynch, 2013). Black students should be able to interact with faculty and staff that can relate, understand their needs, and are aware of what they experience.

Faculty should take the time to interact with the student athletes in their classes. Not to make them feel special or receive any unfair advantages. Instead, it’s an opportunity for perceived barriers to be torn down, for the athletes to get comfortable with communicating with an instructor, and for them hear from the instructor what his or her expectations are for the course. This will also give student athletes a chance to notify the instructor of any future absences as a result of participation in athletics.

Future Research

Future studies should examine the impact of social media on recruiting in college sports. I've had the privilege of working at a Division I PWI with a high profile football program for the last two years. When I listen to the interviews with recruits, it's amazing how many of them spend time talking about how fans from social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram were "showing love." If social media is going to be a vital component of the recruiting process, regulations that are in line with NCAA policy need to be set. Researchers should examine how major college football programs are using social media in recruiting, how high school players use it to promote themselves, and its impact in revenue generating sports.

Secondly, the current study needs to be expanded to include high achieving men's basketball players. Some of the experiences of student athletes differ according to the sport and is worth examining. The experiences of Black male student athletes at private institutions, especially in the South, should be examined as well. This study is limited only to the South and does not include private institutions of higher learning. Differences across sport and region could definitely yield interesting insights. I would also recommend expanding it across race and ethnicity for the benefit of educational research and improved practice.

More studies are needed on the achievement of Black male student athletes in general (not just limited to a sport or region). Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence (2010) called for studies that identify the similarities and differences Black male student athletes — with praiseworthy academic profiles across various institutional types.

Harrison (2008) recommended that future studies replicate his qualitative study of student narratives of the recruiting high-profile Black male athletes. The only difference is, he suggested using images that represent women, sports other than football and/or basketball, and other people of color that participate in sports (Harrison, 2008).

Future studies should also look at high achieving Black female student athletes as well as males from other racial groups (Harrison, 2008). It would be interesting research to conduct not to mention make a meaningful contribution to educational research. Although women's sports don't get the notoriety and attention like men's sports, it's still worth exploring so that we can improve educational and athletic outcomes for Black female athletes.

Lastly, future research should examine activism among high achieving Black student athletes. For Black athletes, excellence was the perfect form of defiance for Black athletes (i.e.- Jesse Owens winning four gold medals in 1936 Nazi Germany). While they may not have been able to be vocal, what they athletically spoke loud enough. I'm not sure that same level of activism exists amongst student athletes anymore. It would be interesting to see what the highest achieving students would say in a study on this subject.

Conclusion

The five high achieving Black male football players in this study were chosen because of their accomplishments on and off the field. Findings from this study indicate that when Black male student athletes are motivated, have something to prove (to yourself and others), and have a great support system, they can achieve at a high level.

These findings also indicate that Black males, despite all that they must endure, can succeed on our college campuses. As institutional leaders, we must continue working, assessing, and searching for ways to better serve our Black male students. My hope is that these findings contributes to that need and addresses at least some of the emergent needs of this high achieving group. I am very proud of all that these participants have accomplished and believe that they will all go on to do great things with their lives. I believe that they will not only become productive members of society, but also future coaches, health care professionals, and entrepreneurs.

Limitations

A number of limitations emerged throughout the process of carrying out this study. The first limitation deals with the small sample size. Unfortunately, on each team, there are a very small number of eligible participants (which is a limitation itself). When searching media guides and public domain information for eligible participants, only two or three players would meet the criteria for participation on any given team (On a team with 85-125 players). There were 53 institutions that were eligible to participate in this study. Out of the 53 eligible institutions, 36 received invitations to participate. Only five schools acknowledged receipt of my invitation but politely declined to participate. Fortunately, EVSU (Only 2 eligible participants) and CPU (only 3 eligible participants) welcomed me to their campuses and allowed me to carry out research.

The second limitation deals with the limited amount of time you have to interview the participants. Because players have classes, film, practice, rehab, and scheduled team meetings, I had a very limited window of opportunity to interview players. The

institutions that rejected me did so because it was during the actual football season. EVSU and CPU allowed me to attend during the off-season. Even during the interviews, participants were pressed for time. Charles showed up for his interview right after a Summer rehab and workout, as did Parker. Billy, while on crutches, came straight from class to do his interview. Barry's interview took place after during his normal lunch time, which is after his class and directly before his scheduled rehab session (he ate his lunch during the interview).

The third limitation is that players transfer. Parker, at the end of his second season transferred to another institution. Transferring complicates the project because, unless you are privy to such information, you don't know why the participant decided to leave. This also forces you as a researcher to have to speculate or reach out to your gatekeeper for any information that they may give.

Appendix A
Informed Consent Document

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Brandon W. Jones, M.Ed.
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
brandon.jones@mavs.uta.edu

FACULTY ADVISOR

Ifeoma Amah, Ph.D.
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
iamah@uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT

The Experiences of High Achieving Black Male Student Athletes at Predominantly White Division I Institutions in the South

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the experiences of high-achieving Black male student athletes at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything that you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The specific purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of high-achieving Black male student athletes at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South.

DURATION

You will be asked to participate in one interview that will last between 1 to 2 hours.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 50.

PROCEDURES

The procedures which will involve you participant in this study include:

1. Complete a participant information sheet.
2. Answering a series of questions about your experiences as a student-athlete, Black male, and perceptions of the institution you are currently attending.
3. Collection of documents related to the institution, participants, etc.
4. Observation and fieldnotes taken during the interview process.

The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, the recordings will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-

word by a professional transcription service. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription by the researcher.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will make a meaningful contribution to the field of educational research and will bring more positive attention to Black males (especially those who play sports) attending colleges and universities.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort, please inform the researcher. You have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence. Your comfort, anonymity, and safety are high priorities in this study as well. Every effort will be made to protect your identity and any sensitive information revealed during this study.

While no identifying information, such as name, address, telephone number, or e-mail address will be collected with measures of interest, clips from recordings may be used in presentations, reports or publications. When you consent to participate in this interview, you will be given an opportunity to select a pseudonym if you want. If you prefer to use a pseudonym, you will be referred to by that pseudonym during all taped proceedings and all information will be de-identified and coded with that unique pseudonym. A list with the pseudonyms will be kept in a locked cabinet with the consent forms in the Educational Leadership & Policy Studies office at the University of Texas at Arlington. Only the primary investigator and faculty advisor will have access to the identifiable data. Also, you may choose to not answer any question or stop at any time for any reason.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered in this study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all identifiable information from this study will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and

Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Brandon Jones at 817-223-1050 or brandon.jones@mavs.uta.edu and Ifeoma Amah, Ph.D. at 817-272-0991 or iamah@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent
Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

PRINT NAME OF VOLUNTEER **DATE**

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER **DATE**

Appendix B
Gatekeeper Solicitation Email

Greetings (NAME OF GATEKEEPER),

My name is Brandon W. Jones and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Department at the University of Texas at Arlington, where I am currently working on my dissertation. I am interested in the experiences of high achieving Black male student athletes playing basketball or football at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South. If you are aware of any Black males who meet the following criteria, I would like to invite them to participate in this study:

- Must be enrolled full-time and in good standing with their respective university.
- Must have earned a cumulative GPA of 2.7 and above
- Must be classified as an undergraduate upperclassmen (sophomore, junior, or senior).
- Must be on a full athletic scholarship and a starter (or important reserve player) in his respective sport(s).

For the study, participants will be asked to fill out an information sheet and take part in one interview to discuss their experiences as a Black male, student athlete, and how they perceive their current university setting. The interview will take no longer than 2 hours. Participation in this study is voluntary and potential participants may choose to not answer any question(s), stop or withdraw at any time with no consequence.

Responses to all questions will be completely anonymous. If you know of any Black males who meet these criteria and are willing to participate in this research study, please respond to this email by (INSERT DATE). If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email at brandon.jones@mavs.uta.edu or by phone at 817-223-1050 or my advisor— Ifeoma Amah, Ph.D. at iamah@uta.edu or by phone at 817-272-0991.

Thank you for your assistance,

Brandon W. Jones, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
The University of Texas at Arlington
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Appendix C

Participant Solicitation Email

Greetings (NAME OF PARTICIPANT),

My name is Brandon W. Jones and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Department at the University of Texas at Arlington, where I am currently working on my dissertation. I am interested in the experiences of high achieving Black male student athletes playing basketball or football at predominantly White Division I institutions in the South. If you are a Black male student athlete who meet the following criteria, I would like to invite you to participate in this study:

- Must be enrolled full-time and in good standing with their respective university.
- Must have earned a cumulative GPA of 2.7 and above
- Must be classified as an undergraduate upperclassmen (sophomore, junior, or senior).
- Must be on a full athletic scholarship and a starter (or important reserve player) in his respective sport(s).

For the study, you will be asked to fill out an information sheet and take part in one interview to discuss your experiences as a Black male, student athlete, and how you perceive your current university setting. The interview will take no longer than 2 hours. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to not answer any question(s), stop or withdraw at any time with no consequence.

Responses to all questions will be completely anonymous. If you meet these criteria and are willing to participate in this research study, please respond to this email as soon as possible so that we can begin scheduling an interview. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email at brandon.jones@mavs.uta.edu or by phone at 817-223-1050 or my advisor— Ifeoma Amah, Ph.D. at iamah@uta.edu or by phone at 817-272-0991.

Thank you for your assistance,

Brandon W. Jones, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
The University of Texas at Arlington
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

NAME: _____ **AGE:** _____

CELL PHONE: _____

EMAIL: _____

HOMETOWN (City, STATE): _____

HIGH SCHOOL: _____

HIGH SCHOOL TYPE *(Please check one):*

PUBLIC _____ PRIVATE _____ OTHER: _____

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY: _____

CLASSIFICATION *(Please select one):* SOPHOMORE JUNIOR SENIOR

MAJOR(S): _____

MINOR(S): _____

SPORT *(Please select all that apply):* BASKETBALL FOOTBALL

POSITION(S): _____

HIGH SCHOOL GPA: _____ **CURRENT GPA:** _____

AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS *(Please include the year received and amount if possible):*

CLUBS & ORGANIZATIONS *(Please include the leadership positions):*

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT (*Church, community service, etc.*):

Appendix E
Interview Protocol

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences as a high achieving Black male student athlete at [INSERT NAME OF INSTITUTION] and I may ask you to elaborate or clarify during our discussion. Also, if it is okay with you I am going to tape-record this interview to ensure that I am capturing your responses accurately.

Background Information	<p>A. Can you tell me about yourself?</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about yourself (hometown, family, background, SES, educational history, etc.)? • What/who influenced your decision to play sports? • [FOLLOW UP] Did they play sports? • If they don't bring up their parents/guardians: Did either of your parents play sports (in high school or college)? • [FOLLOW UP] What sports? Positions? Varsity? College? • Did either of your parents go to college? What about other family members? • If they don't bring up their parents/guardians: What/who influenced your decision to attend college?
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Academics	<p>B. Let's talk about your academic experience(s) at [NAME OF INSTITUTION]</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your expectations of college prior to attending [NAME OF INSTITUTION]? [FOLLOW UP]: Describe the expectations that have been met so far? Have not been met? • What/who influenced your decision to attend [NAME OF INSTITUTION] • Tell me about your experiences on campus. • I see that you major in [INSERT MAJOR], tell me what that's like. • What classes are you enrolled in? How are your experiences in your classes?
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does success in your classes mean to you? • Can you describe the factors that motivate you to succeed in the classroom? • How do you balance the demands of your classes and participating in sports?
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Athletics	<p>C. Let's talk about your involvement in [BASKETBALL/FOOTBALL].</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does success on the field (or on the court) mean to you? • What kind of impact has your athletic participation at [NAME OF SCHOOL] had on your academic success? • Other than athletics, are you involved in any extracurricular activities on and/or off campus? If so, what are they? If not, why not? • How are athletes treated on your campus? By students? faculty? staff? • [FOLLOW UP]: Have you noticed any differences in the way that athletes are treated by students? faculty? staff? What about Black athletes vs. athletes from other racial/ethnic backgrounds? • Would you say that you are different from your teammates? If so, how? If not, why not?
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Achievement	<p>D. Let's talk about achievement</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does being a high-achiever mean to you? • [FOLLOW UP] Based on this definition, would you describe yourself as a high-achiever in your classes? On the field (or on the court)? Why? Why not? • How would others describe your achievements in your classes? on the field (or the court)? • [FOLLOW UP] Is this an accurate perception of you? Why? Why not?
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Campus	<p>E. Let's talk about your peers.</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the way your peers perceive you as a student, athlete, and/or person? • [FOLLOW UP]: Would you say that this is an accurate perception of you? Why? Why not? • [FOLLOW UP]: How does this makes you feel? • Would you say that you are different from your teammates? If yes, how so? If not, why not? • [FOLLOW UP]: What about those students who play other intercollegiate sports? • [FOLLOW UP]: What about those who do not play sports?
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University Officials	<p>F. Let's talk about school officials</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would describe the ways in which your professors perceive you as a student, athlete, and/or person? Can you share some examples with me? • [FOLLOW UP]: What about other staff (e.g. counselors, tutors, etc.) on your campus? Examples? • Can you describe what your coaches (head coach, position coach, etc.) think about academic success? What do they think about your academic success? Examples?
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Future Aspirations	<p>G. Let's talk about your future aspirations</p> <p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are your plans after college? • [FOLLOW UP]: Do you believe that [NAME OF
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	<p>INSTITUTION] is preparing you for your future plans/goals? If so, how? If not, why not?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do resources and support do you need to help you achieve your future plans/goals?
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Recommendations	<p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advice do you have for other student-athletes like yourself? • What recommendations do you have for university officials about ways to improve the academic and athletic experiences of Black student-athletes?
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Concluding Questions	<p>Probes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any other thoughts regarding the experiences of Black male student-athletes in university settings? • Do you have any questions for me? • Are there any other high-achieving Black male student-athletes playing football/basketball at [NAME OF INSTITUTION] that you think I should talk to?
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THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME OUT OF YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE TO MEET WITH ME. I GREATLY APPRECIATE IT.

Appendix F

Observation Fieldnote Template

PARTICIPANT NAME: *[The main subject of this fieldnote]*

PSEUDONYM USED: *[The name used to protect the anonymity of the participant]*

SPORT(S): *[The athletic event the participant is involved in]*

POSITION: *[The role of the participant in his athletic event]*

INSTITUTION: *[The college/university where the participants attends]*

DATE & TIME: *[When the observation took place]*

LOCATION: *[Specific location where the observations took place]*

OBSERVER NOTES & COMMENTS

Enduring questions:

[These are questions that the observer might follow-up on in a memo or keep in mind for the next observation]

Appendix G

Who are they and where are they now?

This section profiles the five high-achieving Black male scholar-athletes who participated in this study and provides an update on their academic and athletic accomplishments. Pseudonyms will continue to be used to protect the anonymity of participants and the institutions, individuals, programs, and organizations associated with them.

Charles Xavier: Is a redshirt senior, majoring in Management at Eastern Valley State University (EVSU). He is from a small town located outside a major southern city in the Southeast. His mother ran track while in college. Both of his parents have college degrees. His father went to a Division 1 PWI in the North and his mother went to a small PWI in the South. His older brother is a former college football player at a major college football program in the South. Unfortunately, he suffered a career ending injury and transferred to EVSU to be with Charles. After college, Charles wants to go to the NFL or do something that makes him happy (anything besides sitting behind a desk). Since our interview in 2013, Charles has led the team in interceptions, earned academic honors three years in a row in his conference, made the college football honorable mention list, and is a projected first-round draft pick in the 2016 NFL draft. He is a proven leader (on and off the field) and continues to mentor the younger players. He helped lead his team to victory during their recent bowl appearance.

Parker Lewis: Parker is a redshirt freshman, majoring in Studio Art at Plymouth University. Parker is a very talented artist from a single-parent home in the Midwest. Because his grandmother did not see the value of attending college, his mother never pursued a postsecondary degree. Not having a father frustrated him as a child.

Therefore, Parker expressed that he always had a chip on his shoulder because he hated seeing other kids participate in events with their fathers. Seeing his mother struggle to provide their family only further troubled Parker. Since he was always a bigger kid in school, sports were a great outlet for him. He excelled athletically and academically to the point where he was recruited by various elite academic colleges. However, his coach didn't believe he had the ability to even play Division 3 football (yet alone Division 1). Parker signed a National Letter of Intent (NLI) with EVSU and proved his coach wrong. If he doesn't go to the NFL after college, Parker plans to continue pursuing Studio Art or Graphic Design. Since our interview in 2013, he not only maintained his GPA, but also, was an important leader on the EVSU special teams unit. Due to the increase in players being recruited at his position, Parker decided to transfer to another institution. Because of his GPA, he was accepted into Plymouth University (PU), an academically elite institution in the South, and still plays football.

Billy Batson: Billy is a redshirt sophomore, majoring in Communication with a concentration in Multimedia Journalism at Coastal Plains University (CPU). He is from a very small town in the Southern state where CPU is located. His father played football at a PWI on the East coast and played in the NFL as well. His mother was a track and field athlete in the Midwest. In addition, all of Billy's siblings participate in sports even though none of his parents forced it on them. He is very respectful, maintains a very positive attitude, and works very hard at every endeavor he undertakes. If Billy does not enter the NFL after college, he is interested in a job in broadcasting. Since our interview in 2014, Billy has not only seen limited playing time at his position (due to injuries and

seniority) but also earned additional duties on special teams. His younger brother, Chauncey, also joined the CPU football team months after our interview. Unfortunately, Billy suffered a broken right clavicle, which only allowed him to play in seven games this past year. Fortunately, he was able to play in their bowl game this past season.

T'Challa Asare: T'Challa is a redshirt junior, majoring in Psychology at CPU. He comes from a two-parent household where academics were emphasized. His parents came to America from West Africa before he was born. His mother attended community college while his father did not have any college experience. His older brother plays on the football team at CPU as well. T'Challa has a heart for service and is the only participant involved in a student organization (and in a leadership capacity). Although he is not sure about what he wants to pursue as a career, he knows that he wants to make a difference in the world and be able to provide for his family. He is also the only participant that talked extensively about his Christian faith. Since our interview in 2014, he has been a dominant force at his position, became a team leader, and finished the season injury free for the first time since his arrival at CPU. He also played in a bowl game for the second time in his career.

Oliver McQueen: Oliver is a sophomore, majoring in Biological Sciences at CPU and is the most talkative of the participants. He was raised in a small town outside of a major city in a Southeastern state. Both of Oliver's parents are college graduates as well as his stepfather. His mother attended an HBCU and his father attended a PWI that is in the same athletic conference as EVSU. All three parental figures are important in his life. His father is also retired from 24 years in the U.S. Navy and plays a very active

role in his life. His mother and stepfather are educators who are also very instrumental in his desire to achieve (especially his mother). After college, Oliver would like to go to medical school in order to become a physician. Since our interview in 2014, he has made significant contributions at his position, helped his team defeat a powerhouse program, and continued to excel in the classroom. Due to a shin injury, he missed 9 games. His team became eligible to participate in a bowl game towards the end of the season and Oliver's recovery. Unfortunately, he broke his leg in practice, was unable to play in the bowl game, and was granted a medical hardship waiver.

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Biographical Information

Brandon W. Jones graduated from Abilene Christian University in 2006 with a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree in Graphic Design. After working in Multicultural Affairs and Residence Life, he earned a Master's of Education degree in Higher Education (Student Affairs) from Abilene Christian in 2009. Brandon completed his Ph.D. in K-16 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2015. He is currently an Assistant Director of the Student Success Center at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. His research interests include Black male achievement, student-athletes, minority student success, and academic support. He plans to continue working in higher education and advancing his research agenda.