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AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT-ATHLETES: FACTORS INFLUENCING
CHOICE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

BY
TANNER FETERL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Science
Major in Sport and Recreation Administration
South Dakota State University

2019

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT-ATHLETES: FACTORS INFLUENCING
CHOICE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

TANNER FETERL

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Master of Science degree in Sport and Recreation Administration and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT-ATHLETES: FACTORS INFLUENCING
CHOICE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

TANNER FETERL

2019

Although support systems are in place for student-athletes, African Americans remain underrepresented in careers requiring a graduate education, including intercollegiate athletic departments (Okahana, Feaster, & Allum, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the factors influencing an NCAA Mid-major, Division I African American student-athletes' choice of pursuing graduate school. Researchers identified themes utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Student Involvement Theory frameworks to explain the influencing factors. The participants consisted of nine African American sophomore, junior, and senior student-athletes who participated in different sports and were chosen using purpose sampling. Each participant took part in an unstructured, one-on-one interview to determine influencing factors for their choice to attend graduate school. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by researchers using data triangulation, member checking, and eliciting examples. The main influencing factors that emerged from the interviews included financial barriers, mentors or lack of one, the role of family members, and access and education about graduate school. Education about graduate school is important for these individuals, so they fully understand the process and steps necessary to get accepted into graduate school. This study highlights some of the challenges that these African American student-athletes encounter as they pursue both athletic and academic success and in identifying strategies

leading to their success. Knowing these challenges can help individuals in higher education better understand the phenomena these individuals experience. Educational seminars about graduate school, and also about financial management, time management, and other life skills that are pertinent is important for these individuals.

Introduction

The ongoing debate about the importance of athletics over academics at colleges and universities continues today. Each one aids in a school's distinction and is a tool to recruit future students. However, is one more important than the other? People show concern that the dominance of athletics overshadows the importance of academics. Division I revenue-generating sports such as football and men's basketball have become more commercialized and are limiting the learning environment for African Americans instead of enhancing it (Comeaux, 2008). These revenue generating sports strain the relationship between college athletics and academics because some athletes view college athletics as a stepping stone for a professional career in sports (Rutledge, 2014). However, the likelihood of these student-athletes making it to the professional ranks is less than one percent (Rutledge, 2014). The dream of professional sports often blurs the relationship between athletics and academics. Critics argue that college athletics creates a platform for educational and career opportunities, especially to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Singer, 2008). Sometimes, revenue-generating sports cause student-athletes to not finish their academic career because of the opportunity to become a professional athlete. Specifically, when African American student-athletes choose to become a professional, the documented graduation rates are statistically lower than their White counterparts (Beamon, 2008; Njororai, 2012). Currently, many African American student-athletes do not pursue graduate school and the odds of becoming a professional athlete is unlikely (Dawkins, Braddock II, & Celaya, 2008). Shortly after these student-athletes step on a college campus for the first time they believe they will become a professional athlete due to intrinsic factors and focus most of their energy on making it

happen. Due to that focus, athletics become the primary aim and less energy is invested in academics. Athletes must maintain the minimum GPA while maintaining the status of a full-time student to remain eligible to play their respective sport (Eckard, 2010). However, they do not realize how potentially detrimental not taking their education seriously can be if they do not become a professional in their respective sport. Even if their grades do not meet the minimum standard to be eligible as an undergraduate student-athlete, their GPA could become a challenge when attempting to be accepted into a graduate school or they might not get accepted at all.

A myriad of influencing factors are present when African American student-athletes choose not to pursue graduate school, such as time, money, lack of a mentor, aspirations to become a professional athlete, and lack of knowledge about graduate school in general. These constraints prevent African American student-athletes from pursuing graduate-level education and research has shown that money and other financial restrictions are the most prominent factor (Millet, 2003). Students with high levels of debt from their undergraduate education are less likely to pursue graduate school (Perna, 2004). African Americans have less family income compared to their White counterparts; however, they often have more opportunities for grants and need-based aid. With rising tuition costs, it takes more than a grant to pay for college, and the probability of receiving financial aid has a strong effect for African Americans attending college (Perna, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing African American Division I student-athletes' choice of whether or not to pursue graduate school. This included the extent to which they felt that their universities emphasized their education as

much as their athletic performance while also preparing them for careers. The participants of this study included nine African American student-athletes. Each participant was interviewed and expressed their viewpoints on attending graduate school. The most influential factors included (a) financial barriers, (b) the need for family support and mentors, and (c) and graduate school opportunities and education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Student Involvement Theory frameworks were applied to explain the phenomena of African American student-athletes in college and the challenges that they encounter as they pursue both athletic and academic success. This study found multiple factors influencing the decision to attend graduate school, which will help educate administrators, coaches, professors, and academic advisors for further research, and seek new ways to reverse this trend. Recommendations for further research and professional practice for discovering and creating new career exploration and sport exit programs/initiatives for athletic departments, faculty, higher education leaders, and student affairs practitioners (e.g., Wellness Center staff, Career Counselors, Mental Health Clinic, Athletic Department staff) are discussed.

Review of Literature

In the United States, academics and athletics are both highly visible and popular (Rutledge, 2014). Both avenues can provide new and exciting opportunities for individuals to improve socially, physically, and mentally while reinforcing values and beliefs. Studies have shown that the relationship between African American student-athletes and their educational experiences, past, present, and future, are strongly shaped by three main factors. The streams of literature contributing to this study being: (a) financial barriers, (b) the need for family support and mentors, and (c) confusion about professional athlete status and graduate school opportunities.

Financial Barriers

The cost of tuition is rising, and many college students struggle to pay off their debt. In 2008, the median debt for undergraduates was \$15,123 (Dwyer, McCloud, & Hodson, 2012). Many student-athletes use their athletic abilities to pay for school through an athletic scholarship. Higher demand for college, a large growth in government grant and loan programs, and declining external funding have caused tuition costs to soar (Vedder, 2004). Student-athletes find that being able to participate in college athletics is a financial benefit because they are able to obtain a subsidized education while playing the sport they love (Singer, 2008). Although there is a large number of athletes at the Division I and II levels, only a small percentage receive enough scholarship money to pay for all of their expenses (Bertolas, Krejci, & Stanley, 2018). Beamon, (2008), found that 90% of the participants stated that if they had not received athletic scholarships, then they would not have had the opportunity to attend college. This is especially true for many individuals who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or families with low

socioeconomic status. In fact, African American student-athletes financially benefit more from athletic scholarships than their White counterparts (Beamon, 2008). Once their four years of eligibility are exhausted, many African American student-athletes are unaware of the options to pay for graduate school.

Financial issues are a major factor for individuals choosing not to pursue a master's or doctoral degree (Perna, 2004). Economic and social problems lead to minimal academic preparation and performance in the early years for African American children which continues on during secondary education (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). A majority of these student-athletes are uninformed on the financial options for graduate school and most individuals have little to no education on graduate assistantships or other financial aid opportunities. However, another option is tuition reimbursement through an employer to help offset costs (Perna, 2004). An additional way that student-athletes can help offset costs for graduate school is by using their red-shirt option. Coaches decided if student-athletes will red-shirt during their undergrad and if the athlete does red-shirt, then they can use their fifth year of eligibility to attend graduate school. These student-athletes have five years to complete their four-year degree and athletic scholarships are awarded on a yearly basis (Berry, 2001; Rutledge, 2014). Using their fifth year to red-shirt and attend graduate school could prove to be financially beneficial.

Scholarships and other types of financial aid are readily available for these student-athletes, but not all get the full financial help they need. The probability of receiving financial aid has a strong effect on African Americans deciding to attend college (Perna, 2000). However, the amount of financial aid received for graduate school could also deter student-athletes from pursuing a master's degree (Millett, 2003).

Students may also be less inclined to pursue graduate school if they are reluctant to debt and have accumulated a significant amount of debt during their undergraduate years (Perna, 2004). In a study by Millet (2003) it was found that 46% of African Americans financed their undergraduate education by taking out loans. For some students, debt can be detrimental, so the decision to enter graduate school is likely influenced by family income.

The likelihood of entering a four-year college or university is greater as family income increases (Schaeperkoetter, Bass, & Gordon, 2015). However, some African Americans come from disadvantaged backgrounds with families who struggle financially. Almost two-thirds of African American children live in single-parent homes and during tough economic times, the median household incomes of African Americans declined by 5.5% (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Some underlying factors such as socioeconomic problems, poverty, single parent homes, drugs and alcohol, and major changes in family structure set up these individuals for academic failure before college (Boswell, 1999). In addition, dependent students with a family income more than \$29,000 were not more likely to pursue, apply for, or enroll in graduate school (English & Umbach, 2016). Family income and rising tuition costs are influencing factors of student-athletes deciding to pursue graduate school or not.

From 1980 to the 2011-2012 academic year, the tuition cost of a public 4-year institution increased by 268% (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Participants in Rutledge's (2014) study noted that they did not want to put the burden of financing graduate school on their families' shoulders, even after they mentioned that most could not afford tuition, so they looked for as many scholarships as possible. Families, and specifically parents,

are involved in discussions of attending certain schools and are firm on their viewpoints on the cost of attending. Some parents explain specific parameters about costs and other parents tell their children not to worry about the cost (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Most athletes felt that they cannot take on the financial burden of graduate school which reduces their aspirations to attend.

Need for Family Support and Mentors

The research is limited on the role of the family in the decision-making process on the decision to attend graduate school, yet it has been found to have a great impact on the individual. When introducing sports to their kids, family members play a key role. Furthermore, during the school selection process, family members are more involved. The decision to enroll in graduate school is a long process and the role of family members is crucial in that decision because the selection of a college is based heavily on academic, sociological, psychological, and geographical factors (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). The Family Systems Theory further explains the role of family members in the college decision making process stating, “in its most fundamental sense, Family Systems Theory is a theoretical approach for understanding family dynamics, roles, familial structures, patterns of communications, boundaries within family members, and boundaries between the family and outside entities” (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015, p. 268). This theory explains the dynamics of family members, their roles, and how they can influence the decision of schools in the college selection process.

The choice of academics and career plans for African Americans is heavily influenced by the experiences of immediate family members (McCallum, 2016). Parents specifically influence the school choice based upon certain factors such as proximity to

home and cost of attendance (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Students' graduate school decisions are influenced by their parents' highest level of education and those students whose parents have completed their masters and who have completed their baccalaureate degrees were more likely to pursue a graduate degree (English & Umbach, 2016; McCallum, 2016).

Students rely on their family for support when making decisions and they rely on them for financial reasons too. Families with a combined income of less than \$29,000 have children that are more dependent (English & Umbach, 2016). The decision to pursue graduate school is a long-term process based on previous educational decisions in unison with family members, specifically parents (McCallum, 2016). These family members provided social and emotional support, resources, and insight throughout their academic journey. In a study, it was found that participants said family support was a significant motivating factor for attending graduate school. Each participant also noted that their families had no tolerance for failing academically (Rutledge, 2014). The role of family members strongly influences an individual's decision to attend graduate school or make other life choices. In a similar study by Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, (2012) they found that participant's choice of graduate school was bound by a committed relationship, marriage, or the need/desire to be closer to family. In that same study, a few participants stated that their degree choice in graduate school was not fully supported by family members and did not meet their expectations. Some participants enrolled in private institutions and commented that their parents were happy with their school choice because of the reputation of the institution. The parents were also pleased that these students had family members graduate from that same institution. Each participant

mentioned that their parent's jobs affected them growing up athletically and academically (Mertz et al., 2012). Families can influence decisions to attend graduate school, but mentors also play a vital role in the decision making process.

Most of the literature about mentoring in sports management focuses on traditional mentoring between one mentor and one mentee, yet there are different forms of mentoring and not all are equal (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Without a mentor guiding them and giving them insight and support, these individuals are less likely to attend graduate school. Mentors who challenged students intellectually helped these individuals achieve their professional goals (Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006). African Americans student-athletes need colleges and universities to recruit and retain African American coaches, athletic administrators, and academic staff to improve their college experience (Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). For African American student-athletes, mentoring assists in the transition and success for these individuals while in college (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). These mentors provide a guiding role for these athletes and help with future development.

African American student-athletes, particularly men, battle with feelings of isolation, social integration, and discrimination (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). Thus, having mentors provide support could significantly increase the success of these young individuals socially, athletically, and academically. Like everyone else, African Americans need role models and mentors to help guide them (Taylor, 2001). Mentors for African American female athletes could prove to benefit their athletic, academic, and social achievements, so these female student-athletes sought out mentors mostly for their future career, athletic development and advice, and for psychological support in certain

situations (Carter & Hart, 2010). Mentors and role models provide student-athletes with guidance for future career endeavors if they are unsure.

Some African American student-athletes do not have their career path determined when they first come to campus and report having strong athletic identities (Lally, & Kerr, 2005). The uncertainty of a future career path can cause these student-athletes to focus more on athletics than academics, but the help of a mentor can help them with future career aspirations. The benefits received through mentorship help guide those who are faced with adversity. Mentoring benefits included assistance for professional and career development, serving as a role model and providing psychological and emotional support (Carter & Hart, 2010; Taylor, 2001).

African American role models also influence school selection (Perna, 2000). Mentors and role models prove to be beneficial for African American student-athletes in regard to graduate school decision and future professional and personal development. Universities should implement some form of a mentorship program with not only faculty but with coaches as well (Cooper, 2016). Aside from their teammates, student-athletes spend the most time with their coaches and these coaches strongly influence their athletes and are able to strengthen a positive and active mentorship (Cooper, 2016). Hiring more minority administrators, faculty, and coaches allows African American student-athletes to have more role models and mentors (Berry, 2001). Faculty should see their role as an opportunity to teach their students commitment, teamwork, dedication, and perseverance about sports and academics (Harrison et al., 2006).

Another method that has proven to be beneficial is constellation mentoring. Cooper (2016) describes this as a group of several mentors who are both similar and

different than the mentee and allows for different perspectives, benefits, and levels of support. Constellation mentoring differs from traditional mentoring in that it includes an association of mentors rather than having just one mentor (Cooper, 2016; Dixon & Kelly, 2014). These mentors can provide a significant amount of insight and support in many areas. These areas include psychological encouragement, campus resource assistance, spiritual guidance, academic support, career exploration, non-athletic identity enhancement, relationship confidant, and so on (Cooper, 2016). Other than mentors, African Americans receive influence from family members and other closely related individuals. These individuals also influence an individual's aspirations and dreams to play their sport professionally as well as providing insight about graduate school opportunities.

Confusion about Professional Athlete Status and Graduate School Opportunities

Aspirations of becoming a professional athlete are more common, yet the likelihood of college athletes making it to the professional level is less than 1% (Colón, 2011; Rutledge, 2014). African Americans make up 70% of student-athletes participating in revenue generating sports. Inversely, about 10% of the student population at predominantly white institutions (PWI) is African American. With these statistics, educators believe that the primary reason for African Americans to attend colleges and universities is strictly to participate in sports (Rutledge, 2014). The main goal of the NCAA is to ensure that student-athletes have the opportunity to earn their degree (Bimper, 2015). These student-athletes view college athletics as a stepping stone to a career in professional sports (Colón, 2011). In order to meet athletic expectations, these student-athletes believe academics only matter to stay eligible to participate in sports

(Dawkins et al., 2008; Rutledge, 2014). The NCAA argues that these student-athletes are “amateurs” because they receive scholarships and not “athleticships” (Eckard, 2010).

African American student-athletes have strong expectations for careers in professional sports, specifically in football and basketball, lower academic achievement, and have a stronger association to their respective sports than their White counterparts (Beamon, 2008). This focused attention on sports takes away from the dedication towards academics. At the NCAA Division I level, FBS football and men’s basketball graduation rates fall behind the males of the general student body (Petr, 2018; Southall, 2012).

Successful college athletic programs have a negative effect on graduation rates and may weaken academic integration (Mangold, Bean, & Adams, 2003). The graduation rate for African American Division I collegiate football players is 59%, while White collegiate football players have a graduation rate of 77%; an 18% difference (Colón, 2011). For the general population, African American males graduate at a rate of 38%, while White males of the general population have a graduation rate of 62%; a 24% gap (Colón, 2011). Moreover, college basketball and football players graduation rates are noticeably lower than that of the general student population (Eckard, 2010). African Americans are more likely to earn their degree once their athletic eligibility has ceased because they are able to focus more on academics. This causes an academic gap between African American student-athletes and their White counterparts because African American student-athletes value athletic success more than academic success (Rutledge, 2014). African American student-athletes focusing solely on athletics and making academics a second or low priority causes these gaps in graduation rates. Once athletes

have run out of eligibility and fail to graduate, they lack any necessary skills needed for the workforce besides their athletic talents (Rutledge, 2014).

College athletics are very time demanding and student-athletes that are able to manage their time between academics and athletics will have a greater chance of graduating. For African American student-athletes that do graduate, many of them receive a degree in “less marketable majors that are riddled with ‘keep ‘em eligible’ less competitive ‘jock courses’ of dubious educational value and occupational relevance” (Beamon, 2008, p. 354, Edwards, 1988). Moreover, the institutional integrity of NCAA member institutions is reliant upon the NCAA’s mission as a whole to give student-athletes the best educational experience as possible. These member institutions must evaluate their initiatives to develop these student-athletes socially, intellectually and personally (Bimper, 2015). If schools have student-athletes take “easy” courses just to stay eligible to play, then they are not getting the best out of their college experience educationally.

For African American student-athletes, there are multiple components influencing the decision to pursue graduate school. Each situation for each individual is different, but some common influencing factors are money, lack of a mentor, the role of family members, and aspirations to play professionally. The difference in graduation rates is staggering and some critics believe that college athletics are being professionalized and are exploiting academics. A significant amount of African American student-athletes expect a career in professional sports and focus more on athletics than academics. This leads to reduced graduation rates and these individuals being unprepared for their future without athletics.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Student Involvement Theory (SIT). These frameworks aid in explaining the phenomena of African American student-athletes in college and the challenges that they encounter as they pursue both athletic and academic success. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a multicultural theoretical framework that examines society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2009; Yosso, 2005). CRT was applied to examine the relationship between race, athletics, and academics when considering the psychosocial well-being and career development of African American student-athletes. CRT plays a key role in this study because African Americans are underrepresented in graduate school and research has shown that these athletes only attend college because of sports. Once there, these athletes are groomed for a professional career in sports. During the 2012-2013 season, African Americans made up almost 52% of the student-athlete population (Bimper & Harrison, 2015). There are racial inequities in college athletics, and this raises concerns of contemporary racism in college sport organizations (Bimper & Harrison, 2015). In addition to Critical Race theory, Astin's Student Involvement Theory plays a key role in helping understand the decision for student-athletes choosing to pursue graduate school.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory believes that students will be more content with their college experience if they participate in more extracurricular activities (Forrester, 2006). This theory also believes that students will study more and be more interactive with peers, staff, and faculty (Forrester, 2006). Furthermore, it was found that aspirations to attend graduate school were influenced by the number hours that students

talked with faculty outside of class, the number of papers that were critiqued by faculty, and the number of hours worked on a professor's research project (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002). Using this theory's framework, we were able to examine if African American student-athletes involvement on campus influenced their decision to attend graduate school.

Methods

The methodology used in this qualitative, phenomenological study was descriptive and introductory with a focus on providing clear and concise descriptions of the participant's responses, without pursuing generalizable findings (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). This study sought to explore the factors influencing African American Division I student-athletes' choice of whether or not to pursue graduate school, including the extent to which they felt that their universities emphasized their education as opposed to their athletic performance and prepared them for careers.

Participants

The participants of this study were nine undergraduate African American student-athletes (5 males and 4 females) from a Division I, land-grant institution in the Upper Midwest during the 2017-18 academic year. Participants were a mix of males and females who were sophomores, juniors, and seniors (1 sophomore, 3 juniors, and 5 seniors). A brief description of these participants is listed in Table 1. Purpose sampling was implemented to determine the participants. "Purposeful sampling attempts to include participants who have experienced the phenomenon under consideration and from those whom the researcher can learn the most" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1988). Selection criteria for the participants was African American student-athletes.

Procedures

IRB approval was obtained and informed consent for each participant was obtained. Collaboration with the athletic department (administrators, coaches, and other student-athletes) was used to recruit participants. Participation in this study was voluntary and subjects were not coerced or influenced by instructors, coaches, teammates, or

administration. Withdrawal from the study at any time was allowed as there were no known risks or direct benefits for subjects participating in this study. Each participant then completed a one-on-one in-person interview which was recorded using only audio.

Table 1. Descriptions of the Nine African American Student-Athlete

| Participant | Sex | Year in School | Sport Played | Major |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Female | Senior | Basketball | Advertising |
| 2 | Male | Senior | Track & Field | Sport & Rec Mgmt. |
| 3 | Male | Senior | Football | Hospitality Mgmt. |
| 4 | Female | Junior | Track & Field | Global Studies in French |
| 5 | Male | Junior | Football | Sport & Rec Mgmt. |
| 6 | Male | Senior | Football | Interdisciplinary Studies |
| 7 | Female | Senior | Volleyball | Sport & Rec Mgmt. |
| 8 | Female | Sophomore | Track & Field | Global Studies in Spanish |
| 9 | Male | Junior | Football | Consumer Affairs |

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Individuals participated in a 30-45 minute, unstructured, in-person interview to determine the influencing factors for attending graduate school. The interview questions were formulated in a manner to maximize the depth and breadth of interviewee responses (Patton, 1990). A majority of the questions were open-ended. Several questions used a forced ranking scale with a follow-up response as to why they chose a certain number (see appendix). Participants were asked about their educational and developmental experience at this institution and the extent to which the university emphasized athletics

over academics. Because unstructured interviews were conducted, follow up questions were asked to obtain more information when necessary. The interviewer utilized member checking and summarized the contents of each interview back to the participants to ensure their statements were accurate. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and themes were identified.

Two main questions were explored:

1. What factors influence the decision of African American NCAA Division I student-athletes whether or not to pursue graduate school?
2. What are the barriers that prevent African American NCAA Division I student-athletes from attending graduate school?

Data Analysis

Data triangulation, member checking, and eliciting examples of interviewee accounts were conducted for validity purposes (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Data triangulation consists of collecting data on the same topic, multiple ways. It allows researchers to capture different perspectives of the same phenomenon and examine evidence and themes from other studies to confirm findings. Phenomenology aims to provide accounts that offer an insight into the subjective “lived” experience of individuals. Given the emphasis, phenomenological studies do not attempt to generate wider explanations; rather their focus is on providing research accounts for individuals in a specific setting. Moreover, phenomenological studies gather data from unstructured or semi-structured interviews (Reeves et al., 2008). Member checking was used to validate interviews by sharing a brief summary of the interview with the research participants. All audio files were transcribed verbatim and the data themes were identified through

conventional content analysis (Singer, 2008). The researchers identified themes utilizing the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Student Involvement Theory (SIT) frameworks to explain the phenomena of African American student-athletes in college and the challenges that they encounter as they pursue both athletic and academic success. CRT plays a key role in this study because African Americans are underrepresented in graduate school. Research has shown that some African American student-athletes attend college because of athletics and are pursuing a professional career in sports. CRT recognizes that racism is commonplace in society and racial realities come from the experiences of people of color. Moreover, when using an analytical lens, CRT can be useful in “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, Howard-Hamilton, & Harper, 2007, p.43). Dixson & Rousseau (2005) state, “utilizing personal narratives and stories as valid forms of ‘evidence’ and thereby challenging a ‘numbers only’ approach to documenting inequity or discrimination that tends to certify discrimination from a quantitative rather a qualitative perspective.” In addition, the racial imbalance of leadership in intercollegiate athletics likely implicates the need for addressing historical and contemporary issues of race (Bimper & Harrison, 2015). After analysis, the themes that emerged could only come from the personal narratives of the participants themselves as they have experienced the phenomena and challenges first hand. In revenue-generating sports, African American student-athletes are disproportionately represented, and colleges and universities claim institutional integrity while deliberately addressing issues of race for these student-athletes (Bimper & Harrison, 2015). Some African Americans come from disadvantaged backgrounds, low-income families, or are the first member of their family to attend college or graduate

school. Therefore, CRT played a key role in this study to address the racial inequalities that are a part of intercollegiate athletics and educate higher education professionals to combat and confront racism.

Forrester (2006) states that Astin's Student Involvement Theory believes that students will be more content with their college experience if they participate in more extracurricular activities. This theory also contends that students will study more and be more interactive with peers, staff, and faculty (Forrester, 2006). Using this theory's framework, the researchers able to determine if an African American student-athletes involvement on campus influenced their decision to attend graduate school. Students who were active both socially and academically in conjunction with participation in extra-curricular activities, interactions with faculty and peers create a dedication to obtain a college degree (Forrester, 2006). When the relationships between these student-athletes and their peers, professors, and other university staff are not sufficient, then their educational experience will be inadequate. This includes the extent to which the university emphasizes academics as much as athletics and educates these student-athletes about graduate school opportunities. In addition, the qualitative software, Atlas.ti was used to help validate the themes that emerged. (see Table 3)

Research Design

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to any information being sent to the participants of the study (Taylor, 2001). After approval, the participants were contacted and provided a recruitment letter clearly stating the purpose of conducting this research and informing each participant that there were no risks or direct benefits from the study. The interviews ensued in the following weeks. The design of this study

was a qualitative analysis of the participant's interviews and sought to reveal the pervasive realities concerning African American, Division I student-athletes and the influencing factors in their choice to pursue graduate school. This includes the extent to which they felt that their universities emphasized their education as opposed to their athletic performance and how the university prepared them for future careers after their athletic eligibility has ended.

Results

In this study, responses were examined, interpreted, and analyzed from nine African American male and female, student-athletes at an NCAA Division I, land grant institution in the Upper Midwest to determine their influencing factors for attending graduate school as well as potential barriers. Each participant gave their own reason as to whether or not they would attend graduate school. Data triangulation revealed three of the four main themes that aligned with previous literature. The major themes along with some direct quotes from select participants are outlined below, which help convey the themes more in-depth.

Table 2. Scaled Interview Questions 12-19

| | M | SD |
|---|-----|------|
| Question 12. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would a master's degree be in your reaching your short-term (within the next 5 years) career and life goals/aspirations? | 8.3 | 1.08 |
| Question 13. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would a master's degree be in your reaching your long-term (10 years from now and beyond) career and life goals/aspirations? | 9.3 | 0.94 |
| Question 14. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would your family and/or friends have in your pursuit of a master's degree? | 7.3 | 2.87 |
| Question 15. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all and 10 being excellent), how would you describe your Pre-K-16 education in preparing you for a graduate degree? | 8.1 | 1.79 |
| Question 16. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all and 10 being excellent), how well has SDSU prepared you for the possibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree? | 7.9 | 1.52 |
| Question 17. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all 10 being excellent), how well have you prepared yourself for the possibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree? | 7.2 | 1.62 |
| Question 18. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all 10 being extremely well), how well do you feel the athletic department and support staff introduces the opportunities of graduate school/higher education? | 5 | 2.94 |
| Question 19. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being low confidence and 10 being high confidence), how confident would you be in knowing that you could successfully complete a master's degree? | 8.7 | 1.25 |

Table. 3 Atlas.ti Theme Frequency Words

| Main Category | Main Codes | Sub Codes | Frequency | Frequency Total |
|--|------------|------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Money/Financial Barriers | Money | Money | 113 | 183 |
| | | Finance | 11 | |
| | | Financial | 17 | |
| | | Free | 6 | |
| | | Grant | 3 | |
| | | Loan | 4 | |
| | | Scholarship | 21 | |
| Mentors/Lack of Mentor | Coach | Tuition | 8 | 139 |
| | | Mentor | 3 | |
| | | Coach | 57 | |
| | | Coaches | 25 | |
| | | Dad | 10 | |
| | | Mom | 12 | |
| | | Parent | 14 | |
| | | Role Model | 10 | |
| Role of Family Members | Family | Faculty | 8 | 124 |
| | | Family | 100 | |
| | | Dad | 10 | |
| | | Mom | 12 | |
| Access/Education about Graduate School | Education | Aunt | 2 | 116 |
| | | Education | 44 | |
| | | Graduate Assistant | 9 | |
| | | Graduate Assistantship | 14 | |
| | | Major | 49 | |

After reading through each transcription the four themes listed in Table 3 emerged. Each theme was then quantified using the qualitative data software, Atlas.ti. The numbers shown in Table 3 indicate the frequency of words and phrases that were related to each of the main themes that appeared in the transcriptions.

Financial Support

The first major theme that appeared was money and other financial issues. Tuition costs are soaring dramatically due to higher demand for college degrees, less external funding, and a large growth in government grant and loan programs (Vedder, 2004).

Money was the biggest influencing factor for these participants to attend graduate school. Moreover, a majority of these individuals were not aware of graduate assistant positions outside of coaching. In addition, these student-athletes were not aware that these graduate assistant positions could help them pay for school. Without any plans of how to financially afford graduate school, these participants felt as if continuing their education would not be an option. A majority of the participants stated that money or lack thereof is the main reason they would not pursue a master's degree. One participant stated that his parents would not be able to co-sign a loan for him. In order to finance their education, 46% of African Americans take out loans (Millet, 2003). Financially, graduate school can be daunting, but there are numerous ways that individuals can help pay for this level of schooling, one of those ways is a graduate assistantship. Like previous studies, participants stated that graduate school choice was heavily influenced by the amount of financial support they would receive either through graduate assistantships and/or tuition reimbursement (Mertz et al., 2012). When one participant was asked if they ever wished to attend graduate school, what would be some reasons preventing them from doing so, she replied, "I would say money, but I can try to be a graduate assistant for volleyball somewhere. So if that's not it, then money. That's really it." A study by Millet (2003) reported that 17% of participants delayed attending graduate school because of undergraduate debt. Along with financial constraints, it was found that participants lack knowledge in other areas pertinent to financing graduate school.

Many of the participants mentioned that they had no knowledge of other graduate assistantship positions outside of the coaching graduate assistants in their respective sports. When one participant was asked whether or not she knew that the athletic

department, academic programs, and other offices on campus had graduate assistant positions, she mentioned that she “was not aware of that.” This individual had knowledge about being a graduate assistant to help pay for school, but a majority of the other participants had no knowledge about graduate assistant positions other than the respective ones in their sport. The pursuit of graduate school for minority students is decreasing due to high costs (Thomas-Long, 2001). These individuals were not aware that they could be a graduate assistant in the ticket office, athletics marketing department, or even a teacher’s research assistant. This lack of education about graduate assistant positions seemed to stem down from the athletic department staff, coaching staff, teachers, and academic advisors. A major theme that correlated with a lack of knowledge about graduate assistantships was also a lack of knowledge when it came to graduate school in general which included GPA requirements and application process along with other necessary steps needed to get accepted.

When the participants were asked if they would have had the option to red-shirt and complete their degree in four years to then use their fifth year of eligibility for graduate school, almost all of the participants said they would have exercised that option to help pay for graduate school while on scholarship. As a freshman, when most student-athletes are red-shirting, not all of them are thinking about pursuing graduate school, so the decision to use that extra year of eligibility to help pay for graduate school gets overlooked. However, having a mentor who has been through that situation can help enlighten these student-athletes to consider using their red-shirt for graduate school.

Mentorship

Another major theme that appeared was the role of a mentor or lack thereof. Mentors are integral to the development of their mentees by providing advice and guidance both personally and professionally. African American student-athletes can also follow in the footsteps of these mentors and emulate the pathway that they took to get to where they are. For African American student-athletes, mentoring assists in the transition and success for these individuals while in college (Kelly & Dixon, 2014). One participant specifically mentioned an individual that he considered to be a mentor. He noted him as being a “suit and tie guy” and this participant wanted to follow in his footsteps as his future goal is to be a collegiate athletic director. This participant’s mentor was also a sports management major and currently works within a college athletic department, specifically in basketball operations at a Division I university.

Another participant noted that she considered her dad a mentor because he has his master’s degree. She stated that “he’s one of the smartest people I know and then he also just like always has opportunities for higher positions in his job and stuff because of all the things he’s learned.” Seeing the success of a mentor can be extremely beneficial for a mentee as they are able to follow in the footsteps of their mentor and gain insightful knowledge when it comes to professional development. When student-athletes first come onto campus they report having strong athletic identities, but don’t have their career path determined (Lally & Kerr, 2005). One participant mentioned that her role models and mentors, who are members of her family, made her feel more empowered to get a master’s degree. She stated,

I feel like they've made me feel like it's possible because I feel like maybe in the African American community there's not that many people in my family who have gotten their masters, but there are some. So like if it wasn't for those few people I probably wouldn't feel like...like maybe I just need to go to work and take care of my family...so I think it's just like encouraging like to keep moving forward in school.

When one individual was asked how the athletic department and supporting staff have introduced him to the idea of graduate school he said, "I don't really get pushed to go on to graduate school, to be honest..." Another participant echoed the same words stating,

That's one thing I don't think I have really gotten pushed as a whole in the athletic department. They do support you in the grades and try to get you to the best position to succeed in school, but like pressing the next thing like what do you do after college and after football. What's after that? I don't think they really push that as well.

These students understand that grades are important, and they understand that their coaches believe strongly in getting good grades, but these individuals mention that no one talks about life after college. One of the participants stated, "I haven't heard anything about basically life after college...I've heard about going to graduate school more from my peers than I have faculty, so like my peers are kind of what put that [idea] in my head." African Americans need role models and mentors to help guide them about their futures (Taylor, 2001). Overall, there is a lack on education for these student-athletes about graduate school that stems down from the athletic department staff, faculty,

advisors, and even mentors, but family members can help guide their kids depending on their level of education.

Family's Level of Education & Involvement

Family backgrounds and parent's level of education are also influencing factors for African American student-athletes attending graduate school. According to Table 1, participants averaged a rating of 7.3 in stating that family members are notable influencers of attending graduate school because these family members can significantly contribute to the decision-making process. Researchers believe that the choice of academics and career plans for African Americans is heavily influenced by the experiences of immediate family members (McCallum, 2016). After conducting the interviews, we found that a majority of the participants would be the first member of their family to attend graduate school and some participants would be the first member of their family to attend college in general. One student-athlete was asked how his immediate family would impact his decision to attend graduate school. He stated,

Well, my parents haven't as much. Like I said they were proud that I first of all got to a university. They want me to get a degree, but they have not pushed me to get a master's. I think it's just because of how they didn't go to school or go to college. So, it's different I feel like if they went to college if they pushed higher education and they pushed that on me, but because they didn't, it hasn't been as big of a deal.

It is not uncommon for children to follow in the footsteps of their parents or emulate their behaviors. Parents specifically influence the school choice based upon certain factors such as proximity to home and cost of attendance (Schaeperkoetter et al.,

2015). However, the opposite can be said as well. Some individuals can grow up in a disadvantaged environment or single parent household which can then motivate them to further their education and provide a more stable lifestyle for their children in the future. One participant echoed these sentiments and when he was asked what he thought influenced the decision of one African American that he knew in particular to pursue his master's degree, he stated,

The way they grew up I know that they didn't grow up the best either. That's how I know they wanted more, and he has some kids. He wanted them to be taken care of and is okay well I think he thinks the same way I do a little bit where I want the best for my kids and my future. So 'imma invest right now. That's what he did. And after that he got a doctorate, so that's pretty cool.

This participant knew of another African American who had a more difficult upbringing but decided to pursue a master's degree because he wanted the best future for his kids. Individuals who come from disadvantaged backgrounds with issues such as socioeconomic problems, poverty, single parent homes, drugs and alcohol, and major changes in family structure set up these individuals for academic failure before college (Boswell, 1999). Each individual has their own reasons on whether or not to pursue graduate school, but their decision can be heavily influenced by members of their family as well as other role models.

Access to Graduate School

Many of the majors that the participants are pursuing need a graduate degree to take their future career aspirations to the next level. A large majority of the participants believed that graduate school would help them achieve both their short term and long-

term career goals. Each participant was asked if graduate school would help them in achieving their short and long-term career goals. Table 1 shows the averages for their responses as 8.3 out of 10 for the achievement of short-term goals and 9.3 out of 10 for the achievement of long-term goals. Almost all of the participants chose their current institution because of athletics and academics were a secondary factor in the participants' school choice. Lastly, Table 1 shows participant's rating the athletic department and supporting staff educating students about graduate school a 5 out of 10. Almost all of the individuals in this study felt that the athletic department, faculty, advisors, and coaches do not do a good enough job of educating students about graduate school. Research has also shown that there is a lack of African Americans in collegiate athletic departments in key decision-making roles. African American staff can help form valuable relationships and recruit these individuals (Rutledge, 2014).

Each one of the preceding factors was found to influence the decision of African American student-athletes on attending graduate school. The results that were found aligned directly with the literature; particularly with money and other financial reasons as being the biggest influencing factor. One factor that was found in the literature that only appeared in one of the interviews was the aspiration to play their respective sport professionally. This could be due to the fact that these individuals do not have the desire to continue playing their sport after college or they may have other reasons to decide to stop playing. Although support systems are in place for student-athletes, African Americans remain to be underrepresented in careers requiring a graduate education, including intercollegiate athletic departments (Okahana, Feaster, & Allum, 2016). Overall, the results found align directly with the literature and allow for further research.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings identified several themes and influencing factors for African American student-athletes deciding to pursue graduate school. Financial barriers, lack of knowledge, and lack of a mentor were shown to be the primary influencing factors for these individuals to decide to not pursue graduate school. These student-athletes were not aware of different ways to finance graduate school, such as graduate assistantships or the option to use their red-shirt during their first year of graduate school. Lack of knowledge about graduate school, in general, could be easily fixed by administrators, coaches, faculty, and academic advisors. Another major influencing factor for these participants was a mentor or lack of one and student-athletes who identified with a mentor showed stronger feelings towards attending graduate school and those without one showed decreased feelings towards attending graduate school. Other smaller factors, such as family influence, not needing or wanting to attend immediately, and time influenced the decision of these student-athletes on attending graduate school. Even though it may not be necessary immediately, each participant stated that graduate school would significantly help their future career aspirations. From these themes, it has been determined that educational seminars need to be done to help educate these athletes, not only about graduate school, but also about financial management, time management, and other life skills that are pertinent. Each participant stated that they would be interested in attending an educational session teaching them about these skills. The theoretical frameworks of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Student Involvement Theory provided a base to help explain the phenomena of African American student-athletes in college, the experiences they have, and the barriers they face.

Through this study, we were able to examine the components influencing the choice of whether or not to pursue graduate school for African American undergraduate collegiate student-athletes. Additionally, this study highlighted some of the challenges that they encounter as they pursue both athletic and academic success and in identifying strategies leading to their success. Knowing these challenges can help individuals in higher education better understand the phenomena these individuals go through. Education about graduate school is important for these African American student-athletes to fully understand their options help set them up for success. Finally, the results could prove to be helpful in providing recommendations and valuable insight into professional practice, and discovering and creating new career exploration and sport exit programs/initiatives for faculty, athletic departments, higher education leaders, student affairs practitioners (e.g., Wellness Center staff, Career Counselors, Mental Health Clinic, Athletic Department staff), and all others associated with intercollegiate athletics.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

A limitation of this study was the sample size, as only nine participants were interviewed. Additionally, this study was conducted at one NCAA Division I institution in the Upper Midwest. This study may serve as a starting point for further research with a larger sample size and participants from other institutions and NCAA Divisions, as well as, examining influencing factors for choosing graduate school for other ethnicities. Furthermore, we plan to introduce a program to incoming freshmen and sophomore students to educate them about graduate school and the requirements necessary to be eligible for admission. In doing so, we highlight the importance of their academic endeavors during their undergraduate education to prepare them for graduate school if

deemed appropriate for them. This study may provide a starting point for future educational programs that will be beneficial for athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents. It will be beneficial to explore strategies to address influencing factors of African American student-athletes decision to pursue graduate school. The ongoing debate to the importance of athletics over academics will continue so long as college athletics are continuing to generate revenue. The college athletics landscape is constantly changing, and administrators, coaches, student-athletes, and universities need to adapt. Implementing changes to address some of the challenges African American student-athletes face may create more of a balance between the importance of athletics and academics.

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Appendix A

Research Questions

Interview Guidelines and Questions

The interviews will be conducted using an unstructured format. The following questions are typical of those that will be asked in the course of the interview. Reflective listening and minimal encouragers will be used to maximize participant responses and increase the depth of interview content. The actual wording of the questions will be adapted to be appropriate to context and the flow of the interview.

1. What are some reasons you have chosen to participate in this study?
2. What were some reasons you selected to attend SDSU?
3. Have you ever transferred? What were some reasons you transferred to SDSU?
4. What is your undergraduate major?
5. Have you changed your major?
6. What were some reasons you selected this major?
7. What do you plan to do with your major?
8. Have you ever thought about pursuing a graduate school degree?
9. What is the highest level of education of your parents?
10. If you were to attend graduate school, would you be the first member of your family to attend grad school?
11. Is a graduate degree required for the career(s) you wish to pursue? Choose one of the following: Yes/No/I don't know
12. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would a master's degree be in your reaching your short-term (within the next 5 years) career and life goals/aspirations?
13. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would a master's degree be in your reaching your long-term (10 years from now and beyond) career and life goals/aspirations?
14. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not important and 10 being extremely important), how important would your family and/or friends have in your pursuit of a master's degree.
15. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all and 10 being excellent), how would you describe your Pre-K-16 education in preparing you for a graduate degree?
16. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all and 10 being excellent), how well has SDSU prepared you for the possibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree?
17. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all 10 being excellent), how well have you prepared yourself for the possibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree?
18. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being not at all 10 being extremely well), how well do you feel the athletic department and support staff introduces the opportunities of graduate school/higher education?
19. On a scale of 0-10 (with 0 being low confidence and 10 being high confidence), how confident would you be in knowing that you could successfully complete a master's degree?

20. Has anyone on campus ever talked to you about pursuing a master's degree? Please describe.
21. If you DON'T EVER wish to attend graduate school, what is preventing you from considering the opportunity? (e.g., time, money, support, etc.)
22. If you don't wish to attend graduate school right now, but MAY in the future, what might be some reasons for pursuing a graduate degree?
23. Would you consider attending graduate school if you had enough eligibility to continue playing?
24. Do you know someone of your race/ethnicity (African American) who has a master's degree? Who or what influenced their decision making to pursue a master's degree?
25. How have they been a role model for you and others consider a master's degree?
26. If the athletic department and support staff were to share this information with you, what ideas do you have for best strategies?
27. What additional recommendations and ideas do you have to ensure that more African Americans receive information about graduate school? What would this look like from the following groups:
 - a. Coaches
 - b. Athletic Department Administrators
 - c. Athletic Department Academic Advisors
 - d. Faculty
 - e. Academic Advisors (Who are not from the Athletic Department)
 - f. Career Counselors (Who are not from the Athletic Department)