

**HEALING HATE:
PROMOTING READINESS OVER ELIGIBILITY**

*Paul C. Harris**

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* Paul C. Harris, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the Curry School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia.

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INTRODUCTION

IN 2014, a headline read: “Shabazz Napier Says He Goes to Bed Starving Because He Can’t Afford Food.”¹ Shabazz Napier served as the starting point guard for the University of Connecticut men’s basketball team, which went on to win the national championship that year. Napier made these concerning statements at the Final Four press conference, causing the conference to go viral and eventually pushing schools to provide athletic scholarships that cover the full cost of attendance.² This discussion also highlighted the decades-old concern that the college sports landscape exploits student athletes generally, and in particular Black male student athletes.

Sports are often the only reason why Black males will attend college, and they see it as the avenue through which they can improve their social condition.³ It is in sport that many believe Black males can find success and achieve the “American dream.”⁴ Sports have long been deemed a “dramatic means of improving one’s station in life, of gaining economic advantage and prestige that would have been impossible to achieve without.”⁵ Black men represent the majority of professional basketball and football players, in spite of only making up 12% of the general population.⁶ In 2006, Black men comprised 79% and 68% of the National Basketball Association and the National Football League, respectively.⁷ To that end, two-thirds of Black males between the ages of thirteen and eighteen believe that they can earn a living playing profes-

¹ Joseph Zucker, *Shabazz Napier Says He Goes to Bed Starving Because He Can’t Afford Food*, BLEACHER REP. (Apr. 7, 2014), <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2020901-shabazz-napier-says-he-goes-to-bed-starving-because-he-cant-afford-food>.

² Mark Cooper, *Game Change: Scholarships Covering the Full Cost of Attendance Mean Less Stress for Athletes, but Another Expense for Universities*, TULSA WORLD (May 12, 2015), https://www.tulsaworld.com/sports/college/osu/game-change-scholarships-covering-the-full-cost-of-attendance-mean/article_18054aa7-5e45-5845-87de-a91030d2a2bf.html.

³ WILLIAM C. RHODEN, *FORTY MILLION DOLLAR SLAVES: THE RISE, FALL, AND REDEMPTION OF THE BLACK ATHLETE* (2006).

⁴ J. Singer & R. May, *The Career Trajectory of a Black Male High School Basketball Player: A Social Reproduction Perspective*, 49 INT. REV. FOR SOC. SPORT 299 (Aug. 13, 2010).

⁵ RHODEN, *supra* note 3, at 42–43.

⁶ D. STANLEY EITZEN, *FAIR AND FOUL: BEYOND THE MYTHS AND PARADOXES OF SPORT* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

⁷ EARL SMITH, *RACE, SPORT, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM* (2007).

sional sports.⁸ Some scholars argue that Black males are only deceived by such endeavors and ultimately lock themselves into their low-status positions in society by pursuing sports rather than academia.⁹ Historically, Black men mostly participated in the revenue-generating sports of basketball and football, as well as track and field.¹⁰ Furthermore, although Black student athletes appear to reap educational benefits from their participation in athletics, they are more susceptible to sports working as an exploitive system—rather than a mobilizing one—as their status increases (i.e., intramural to junior varsity to varsity to college).¹¹ Athletic programs may present a double bind for Black males: many believe it is the only way they can get to college, but if and when they do get there, they may be considered a commodity.¹²

This narrative of exploitation of student athletes is not new. The term student-athlete was coined in the 1950s.¹³ Ray Dennison, a college football player in that era, died due to injuries suffered on the field.¹⁴ When his wife tried to get workers' compensation for his death, she was denied.¹⁵ The school argued that, though Ray was an athlete for the university, he was not an employee.¹⁶ Thus, the term student-athlete preserves the notion of amateurism in college sports. And to many, it also preserves the commodification of athletes.

Presently, this misleading notion of amateurism serves as the primary exploitive force for Black male student-athletes, given that the college industry is worth approximately sixteen billion dollars.¹⁷ To preserve the fiction of amateurism, the governing body of collegiate athlet-

⁸ EITZEN, *supra* note 6.

⁹ Richard Majors, *Cool Pose: African American Masculinity and Sports*, in *Contemporary Themes: African-Americans in Sport* (Gary A. Sailes, ed. 1998)

¹⁰ Samuel R. Hodge et al., *Brown in Black and White—Then and Now*, 51 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 928, 936 (2008).

¹¹ Paul C. Harris, *The Sports Participation Effect on Educational Attainment of Black Males*, 46 EDUC. AND URBAN SOC'Y 507, 516–18 (2014); Shaun R. Harper et al., *Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I College Sports*, CTR. FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & EQUITY IN EDUC. 7, 22 (2018).

¹² ADAM ZAGELBAUM, *SCHOOL COUNSELING AND THE STUDENT ATHLETE: COLLEGE, CAREERS, IDENTITY, AND CULTURE* (Routledge 2014).

¹³ Robert A. McCormick & Amy Christian McCormick, *The Myth of the Student-Athlete: The College Athlete as Employee*, 81 WASH. L. REV. 71, 83–84 (2006).

¹⁴ Taylor Branch, *The Shame of College Sports*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY (Oct. 2011), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/308643/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Daniel Laws, *Amateurism and the NCAA: How a Changing Market Has Turned Caps on Athletic Scholarships into an Antitrust Violation*, 51 U. RICH. L. REV. 1213 (2017).

ics, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), demands that its member institutions not compensate their athletes with scholarships exceeding the cost of attendance.¹⁸ While this policy has been challenged on a number of occasions,¹⁹ its most significant obstacle occurred in 2018 when the state of California passed a law allowing athletes to receive pay for endorsements and the use of their images. This new bipartisan law, called the Fair Pay to Play Act, allows college athletes to earn money from endorsements and the use of their images.²⁰ The notion of amateurism that once guaranteed student-athletes would receive no revenue aside from scholarship money—which is often not enough to sustain living expenses—is quite possibly nearing its extinction. This law has the capacity to forever change the landscape of college sports. There is no simple algorithm to determine exactly how to regulate the earnings of student-athletes. However, this bill strongly signals that it is time to stop pretending like student labor is not feeding a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. To this end, it is imperative that student-athletes in general, and Black male student athletes more specifically, are ready for college, not just eligible.

High school student-athletes who desire to participate in Division I or II collegiate athletics have to register with the NCAA Eligibility Center.²¹ This well-intentioned system is designed to ensure that all student-athletes matriculating to play a college sport meet standardized minimal educational requirements. While in theory it is intended to ensure that student-athletes are prepared for college-level work, in practice it only ensures that they are eligible to play collegiate sports. The difference can be stark. For example, Dexter Manly, a star for the Washington Redskins in the 1980s, graduated high school eligible for college, and remained eligible throughout his four years. Yet through it all, he was unable to read.²² And while this example was close to forty years ago, the stark contrast between eligibility and readiness persists. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill committed one of the worst academic fraud schemes in the history of college sports that per-

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *See, e.g., O'Bannon v. Nat'l Collegiate Athletic Ass'n*, 802 F.3d 1049, 1052 (9th Cir. 2015).

²⁰ Michael McCann, *What's Next After California Signs Game Changer Fair Pay to Play Act into Law?*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (Sept. 30, 2019), <https://www.si.com/college/2019/09/30/fair-pay-to-play-act-law-ncaa-california-pac-12>.

²¹ *NCAA Eligibility Basics*, COLLEGEBOARD (2020), <https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/prepare/athletes/ncaa-eligibility-basics>.

²² Steve Jacobson, *Manley Finally Gets a Read on Education He Missed*, BALTIMORE SUN (Oct. 8, 1992), <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1992-10-08-1992282145-story.html>.

sisted for years.²³ What began as a well-intentioned endeavor to empathize with the unique experience of collegiate student athletes became maintenance of a status quo that is educationally exploitative in nature. Students at UNC were taking classes that would never meet nor for which there were any substantive content or assessments. This happens when eligibility is the goal.

I. RACE AND SPORTS

Sports have served an enormous role in our society for decades; among young people, sports participation is still the single most popular school-sponsored extracurricular activity, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender.²⁴ Involvement in sports is generally accompanied by attachment to other influential people (such as coaches and teammates).²⁵ Further, through sports involvement, adolescents make friends, gain popularity, and acquire college-related values and expectations. At least one scholar argues that sports can increase the number of opportunities that youth have to connect with others, leading to very positive, meaningful experiences and outcomes and increasing their self-awareness in relation to the rest of the world.²⁶ While some researchers historically have posited that participation in sports detracts from any gains in academic areas,²⁷ others contend that there are numerous benefits to participating in sports.²⁸ For example, some academics in the field argue that sports participation may provide adolescents with the social opportunities and utilitarian skills to pursue and achieve culturally defined goals or, more subjectively, the expectation that sports involvement will help them achieve desired goals in school and in later adult life.²⁹ Sports participation, in general, has also been found to be beneficial in terms of increased physical health, decreased adolescent suicide, drop-out rates, academic achievement, and

²³ See Sara Ganim & Devon Sayers, *UNC Report Finds 18 Years of Academic Fraud to Keep Athletes Playing*, CNN (Oct. 23, 2014), <https://www.cnn.com/2014/10/22/us/unc-report-academic-fraud/index.html>.

²⁴ Kathleen E. Miller, et al., *Untangling the Links Among Athletic Involvement, Gender, Race, and Adolescent Academic Outcomes*, 22 SOC. SPORT J. 178, 178 (2005).

²⁵ Don Sabo, et al., *High School Athletic Participation and Adolescent Suicide*, 40 INT'L REV. FOR SOC. SPORT 5, 6 (2005).

²⁶ CARL E. JAMES, *RACE IN PLAY: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOCULTURAL WORLDS OF STUDENT ATHLETES* 1, 27 (2005).

²⁷ See, e.g., JAMES S. COLEMAN, *THE ADOLESCENT SOCIETY* (1961).

²⁸ See, e.g., Herbert W. Marsh & Sabina Kleitman, *School Athletic Participation: Mostly Gain with Little Pain*, 25 J. SPORT & EXERCISE PSYCHOL. 205, 205 (2003); Tami M. Videon, *Who Plays and Who Benefits: Gender, Interscholastic Athletics, and Academic Outcomes*, 45 SOC. PERSP. 415, 415 (2002).

²⁹ Sabo et al., *supra* note 25, at 6.

educational attainment.³⁰ Across race and gender, however, the role of participation in sports is argued to vary.³¹

For example, while participation in sports is typically correlated with positive outcomes such as increased academic achievement, this is not always the case for Black men.³² Some researchers have clarified that sports participation has educational benefits for Black males at the high school junior varsity level, but those benefits decrease as they matriculate to play at the varsity level in high school and then for college teams.³³ Specifically, Black male student athletes at Division I institutions are graduating at lower rates than other groups of student-athletes and non-athlete Black men.³⁴ According to Harper (2018), particularly those competing in one of the “power 5” conferences—the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC)—experience fewer educational benefits than White student-athletes or Black non-athlete students.³⁵ Specifically, only about 55.2% of collegiate Black male student-athletes graduate within six years, compared to 69.3% of student-athletes overall and 76.3% of undergraduate students overall.³⁶ Interestingly, even though Black males made up only 2.4% of college undergraduates, they still represented 55% of the football teams and 56% of the basketball teams for the sixty-five universities in these five conferences. While it might appear that such representation in university athletics is a route to diminishing the lag in Black male higher education graduation rates, these data show that it actually serves to perpetuate the inequity and widen the existing gap. This paper argues that many Black male student-athletes are being prepared to succeed as part of an athletic organization without receiving equal attention toward their academic preparation.

II. COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

The U.S. Department of Education noted in 2016 that postsecondary education is a necessity for social and economic mobility.³⁷ College and career readiness (CCR) is increasingly important to global competitiveness in today’s society.³⁸ CCR refers to the preparation nec-

³⁰ Harper et al., *supra* note 11; Harris, *supra* note 11.

³¹ See Harper et al., *supra* note 11, at 1.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*; see also Harris, *supra* note 11.

³⁴ Harper et al., *supra* note 11, at 1.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Press Release, Department of Education, FACT SHEET: A College Degree: Surest Pathway to Expanded Opportunity, Success for American Students (Sept. 16, 2016).

³⁸ John Lee & Tafaya Ransom, *The Education Experience of Young Men of Color*, COLLEGEBOARD (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://secure->

essary for students to matriculate successfully to and graduate from college and into the workplace. CCR requires students to embrace various skills that will allow them to successfully pursue and complete postsecondary education and begin their careers.³⁹ According to researcher David Conley, college-ready students can understand the structure of knowledge and major ideas of core academic subjects, develop a set of cognitive strategies as they increase their understandings of key content, possess the academic behaviors necessary to successfully manage and engage with a demanding workload, and enjoy a contextual understanding of the navigational and cultural elements of gaining admission to and being successful in college.⁴⁰ Indicators for such skill acquisition, according to colleges, are grade point averages (GPA), coursework, and achievement test scores.⁴¹

As such, increased attention given to the college success of Black male student-athletes is warranted. Specifically, it is imperative to focus on the identity development of Black males. Adolescents experience competing priorities in their development. Their search for self-identification, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, and future planning all interact. Sports add an unexpectedly complex layer to these stage-related tasks.⁴² Athletic identity, defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role, is a concept that has been discussed for several years.⁴³ Student-athletes with a high athletic identity may be more likely to engage in long-term exercise behaviors, have superior athletic performance, have higher self-esteem, and perhaps even better social relationships and confidence. Alternatively, student-athletes with a high athletic identity could potentially ascribe so much of their time, energy, and effort to their athletic identity that their athletic and self-identities become synonymous. Over-identification with the athlete role can create problems including overtraining, anxiety, substance abuse, and potentially disordered eating.⁴⁴ One researcher, James Marcia, suggests that individuals in adolescence and beyond may be characterized as belonging to one of four identity status categories: diffusion,

media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/advocacy/nosca/nosca-educational-experience-young-men-color-research.pdf.

³⁹ See Melissa Roderick et al., *College Readiness for All: The Challenge for Urban High Schools*, 19 *THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN* 185 (2009).

⁴⁰ David Conley, *A Complete Definition of College and Career Readiness*, *EDUC. POL'Y INFO. CTR.* (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537876.pdf>.

⁴¹ Roderick et al., *supra* note 40, at 185.

⁴² Emily Heird, & Jesse Steinfeldt, *An Interpersonal Psychotherapy Approach to Counseling Student-Athletes: Clinical Implications of Athletic Identity*, 16 *J. OF C. COUNS.* 143 (2013).

⁴³ *Id.* at 147.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 145.

moratorium, foreclosure, or achievement.⁴⁵ These categories borrow from researcher Erik Erikson's conceptualization of identity development. Under Erikson's view, developing one's identity involves exploring various possible positions in the world and ultimately making mature commitments to certain ones, such as religion, career, and political affiliation.⁴⁶ Under Marcia's theory, each status category can be defined by the presence or absence of exploration and commitment.

Ideally, individuals will continuously engage in "MAMA" cycles (Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement), constantly exploring options, shifting goals as they decide what they want to make of themselves and what they have to work with, and making commitments to alternatives as they shape themselves and their future.⁴⁷ Individuals who embody this identity processing style are self-reflective, self-disciplined, interested in learning new things, and have a sense of direction and commitment.⁴⁸ For Black male student-athletes, over-identification (e.g., premature commitment or identity foreclosure) with the athletic role has been tied to harmful outcomes, such as decreased college success and lower rates of completion.⁴⁹ The opportunity and challenge is how to encourage Black male student-athletes to maintain a healthy identity, one that values the importance of the role of athlete, while also valuing, developing, and being empowered in other roles as well. The development of a multidimensional sense of self is critical for college readiness and success, yet is often lacking in Black male student-athletes upon matriculating to college.⁵⁰

III. IMPLICATIONS

Given the historical context within which the participation of Black males in sport rests, it is critical to intervene as early as possible. School counselors are in the best position to serve the academic, emotional, and career needs of their students. One challenge is that many

⁴⁵ James Marcia, *Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status*, 3 J. OF PERSONALITY AND SOC. PSYCHOL. 551 (1966).

⁴⁶ ERIK ERIKSON, *IDENTITY AND THE LIFE CYCLE: SELECTED PAPERS* (1959).

⁴⁷ Joanne Stephen et al., *Moratorium-achievement (Mama) Cycles in Lifespan Identity Development: Value Orientations and Reasoning System Correlates*, 15 J. OF ADOLESCENCE, 283 (1992).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ See Eddie Comeaux, *Rethinking Academic Reform and Encouraging Organizational Innovation: Implications for Stakeholder Management in College Sports*, 38 INNOVATIVE HIGHER EDUC. 281 (2013); Darren Kelly & Marlene Dixon, *Successfully Navigating Life Transitions Among African American Male Student-Athletes: A Review and Examination of Constellation Mentoring as a Promising Strategy*, 28 J. OF SPORT MGMT. 498 (2014).

⁵⁰ EDWARD F. ETZEL, *COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES FOR COLLEGE STUDENT-ATHLETES* (2009).

counselors do not realize this. Unfortunately, the history of “guidance” counseling often conjures up the idea of someone placing students in classes, signing them up for the SAT, and dropping them from courses whenever they requested. Contemporary school counselors, if they are not already, should be trained in lifespan development, college admissions, multicultural counseling, identity development, and more, all of which can help in ensuring that Black men’s sports involvement can serve as an added value to their educational experience. To that end, research suggests that, in general, when Black students are provided with more personalized support from their counselors, they are better able to navigate the college preparation process.⁵¹ School counselors are in a critical position to influence the college and career readiness of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program. The school counselor has the challenging opportunity of facilitating the educational and vocational development of Black males in particular, who are often subject to negative life circumstances that serve as barriers to such development. School counselors are systemic change agents within schools who can coordinate efforts amongst all stakeholders in Black male student-athletes’ educational experiences. Specifically, school counselors are critical to ensuring that athletic participation promotes more positive academic outcomes.⁵² Ultimately, school counselors have the potential to coordinate efforts with a number of stakeholders to facilitate a positive integration of sports into the educational experience of Black males.

⁵¹ Raquel Farmer-Hinton & Toshiba Adams, *Social Capital and College Preparation: Exploring the Role of Counselors in a College Prep School for Black Students*, 57 NEGRO EDUC. REV. 101 (2006); Paul Harris et al., *Promoting the Academic Engagement and Success of Black Male Student-Athletes*, 97 HIGH SCH. J. 180 (2014).

⁵² Paul C. Harris, *Counseling and Advising Black Male High School Student-Athletes*, in *Black Males and Intercollegiate Athletics: An Exploration of Diversity in Higher Education* 11 (Robert A. Bennett et al. eds., 2015).
