

The Retention of Collegiate Athletes as Minority Students and Future Teachers: A Case Study

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Abstract

Today much attention is given to the recruitment of collegiate athletes, generally for the purpose of building strong athletic programs. Rarely is this recruitment seen as a possible means to boost affirmative action efforts to increase the number of minority students on our college campuses, or to assist in attracting minorities into professions in need of minorities, such as teaching.

This paper presents a case study which outlines some concerns and problems as seen from the perspective of the coordinator of advisement services in a college of education at a large south-central university. This person serves as the advisor of approximately 45 collegiate athletes, many of whom are minority students contemplating careers in teaching. The problems fall into two basic categories: (a) the retention of minority collegiate athletes, and (b) the recruitment and retention of minority future teachers. Some possible solutions to these problems are outlined in the form of strategies for effective academic advisement, and possible means to dispel myths contributing to the low academic achievement of black athletes.

Background Theme

The underlying theme of this paper involves the need for effective academic advisement of black student-athletes, particularly in teacher education programs where minorities are currently in high demand. Generally considered unprepared for the rigors of a college classroom environment and a majority white atmosphere, the typical black collegiate athlete could greatly benefit from an academic advisor who, among other characteristics, is familiar with the cultural background and needs of black students; has a positive attitude toward blacks and makes an honest effort to build on their academic strengths; creates and discusses goals and objectives

for students; and assists black student-athletes in developing clear and realistic priorities so they can build for their futures (Underwood, 1986). Such characteristics of advisors are even more necessary in today's environment where fewer black role models exist in education and where typical attitudes about sports in black society prevail.

Problems

Retention of Collegiate Athletics

Generally, affirmative action personnel believe that, of all minorities on our campuses, student-athletes have the most advantages. They are highly recruited by coaches, alumni, and college presidents; and systems and structures of academic scholarships, counselors, and tutors have all been created to help them along their way once recruited to an institution. Regardless of these efforts and benefits, extreme problems remain. Grades, persistence, and graduation rates, according to Edwards (1984) and McLaughlin (1986), are much lower for black athletes than for their white counterparts. Sixty-five to 75 percent of the black athletes receiving collegiate athletic scholarships never graduate from college, and of those said to have graduated, 60 to 65 percent received a physical educational degree or one in another field generally held low in esteem.

Many black athletes come to a university with very poor academic backgrounds, and thus suffer from the same problem plaguing many other minority students. They are still playing "catch up" from hundreds of years of separate and unequal educational opportunities. In addition, Edwards (1983) maintains that black athletes must fight the prevailing attitude shaped by the media which labels them as "dumb jocks" and promotes the idea of the athletic superiority of blacks. Edwards hypothesizes that much of black athletes' academic failure is due to family upbringing which promotes athletics because of the publicized fame and wealth going to the young black athlete. He says "dumb jocks" are not born; they are being systematically created because parents, schools, and teachers all tend to encourage any black child showing athletic prowess at an early age to practice, push, and "go for it," often at the expense of striving for academic excellence. Thus time is taken away from studies both in and out of school to get ready for the big game.

The athlete, in turn, gets strokes, increases in self-esteem, and confidence from his success on the court or field. Consequently he asks, "Why mess with studying when this glory feels so good?" Once recruited to college sports, he finds the glory is still on the court or field. The athlete's self-esteem turns to embarrassment and shame in the classroom. He says,

How can I ever begin to compete with the eggheads? I'll play it cool, be top dog and make this school stuff appear to be kid's stuff. Actually I'd love to understand it, but I can't read well

enough, and the math is so high above me from my weak background in junior high, it's like a foreign language—which incidentally I never took. It interfered with football practice.

But still he must stay eligible so that eventually he can go professional, his big dream.

In actuality, only one in every 10,000 high school football players ever signs as a rookie and gets a major professional contract (Edwards, 1983). Of 1,200,000 high school football players in 1982, only 40,000 played college ball, 13,000 were eligible for the draft, and only 110 signed professional contracts. The number of blacks making a living in professional football in 1982 was 1,404. With the United States Football League now out of the picture, the numbers obviously would be smaller.

Basketball statistics are similar. Only one in 10,000 who plays in high school signs a professional contract. Of 550,000 high school basketball players in 1982, 21,000 played college ball, 5,900 were eligible for drafts, 220 actually got drafted, and only 57 received professional contracts. A total of 183 blacks made a living in professional basketball in 1982 (Edwards, 1983). Considering these statistics, it is obvious that young black athletes must be shown a life other than athletics.

On the case study campus, many student-athletes see teaching and coaching in high school as a possible outlet for their abilities and interests if they do not make the pros. The reality is that they must also meet and pass the general educational requirements, grade point averages, National Teachers Exam, curriculum exams, and all the other criteria imposed by the state in its effort to reform education and teacher preparation.

Last year it was determined that of 37 scholarship athletes in the teacher preparation program at the case study university (more than half of whom were minority students), only two students had the combined ACT scores and college grade point averages required to be admitted into teacher education. This is not to say that the other 35 could not remove deficiencies by coursework and testing, but it would be an extremely difficult, time-consuming, expensive and frustrating process for them. National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility rules also complicate the issue by making it difficult for students to repeat courses they passed with low grades.

The majority of these students (approximately 29 of the 37) were pursuing Health and Physical Education degrees, an area in extremely low demand due to school budget cuts. Therefore, even if the students remove ACT deficiencies, pass the NTE and curriculum exams, and achieve the minimum 2.5 overall GPA (their cumulative average was barely a 2.0), their chances of obtaining a straight PE teaching job are slim.

To help in the marketability of its physical education students, the case study college recently built a 24-hour science teaching endorsement into its PE program so that students would also be able to teach in this high-demand

area. This requirement consisted of 24 hours of Chemistry, Physics, Biological Science and Physiological Science, all at the level required for majors and pre-med students. Such coursework is demanding even for an average student, but almost impossible for an athlete who often has academic difficulties.

Recruitment and Retention of Minority Future Teachers

Another area which has recently become a nationwide problem is the increasing shortage of teachers. Brown (1987) maintains that approximately 1.3 million people will have to be drawn into teaching between 1987 and 1993 if the nation's schools are to have sufficient staff. This estimate is about 360,000 teachers more than the expected new supply, according to U.S. Department of Education estimates.

This problem is even more evident in the ranks of minorities. Between 1976 and 1983, the percent of bachelor's degrees in education awarded to black decreased 52 percent ("At Risk," 1986), and with new competency tests for licensure and certification of teachers, the percentage of minority teachers may become even less. This fact has serious ramifications for black students who need successful role models other than those in athletics. The editors of *Education Week* said in a recent article ("At Risk," 1986) that in the years ahead, a growing proportion of America's young will be poor, nonwhite, limited in their English proficiency, and from single-parent families in which parents themselves lack education. In addition, black and Hispanic children continue to score far below their white peers on standardized tests, scoring about 100 points lower than whites on verbal and mathematical skills. Furthermore, minority children are far more likely to drop out of high school. In 1983, 75 percent of all white 18- and 19-year-olds graduated from high school, yet only 60 percent of the blacks and 50 percent of the Hispanics graduated. With stiffened graduation requirements and current school reform movements, some educators are worried that even more minorities will drop out of school.

Research also identifies that blacks and Hispanics are less likely to enroll in college, and recent statistics from the Educational Testing Service ("College Standards Becoming," 1986) show that fewer American colleges are easing entrance requirements for minorities than were doing so at the end of the 1970's. Thirty-nine percent of the four-year private institutions in 1979 granted exceptions to their admissions requirements for minority students, but last year only 25 percent did so. At the four-year public campuses, the percentage granting exceptions to minorities decreased from 45 percent to 40 percent.

The number of total degrees awarded to minorities is consequently declining (Rodman, 1986). Only 6.5 percent of all bachelor's degrees in 1984 went to black students, compared to 10 percent in 1976. The number of master's degrees awarded to blacks is also down from 6.6 percent to 5.8

percent during the same time period ("At Risk," 1986). Despite a statewide increase in black undergraduates in 1986 compared to 1980 in the case study state (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 8, 1986), blacks still comprise only 2.8 percent of the entire student body on the campus studied. Only 20 black undergraduates are enrolled in the entire college of education, which is composed of approximately 1,200 students (*Student Profile*, Fall 1986).

There are positive reasons for the decrease in numbers of blacks in education. "Women and minority-group members, the traditional groupings from which teachers emerged, now have wider opportunities in higher-paying fields" ("Recruiting Drive," 1987). More and more doors are now open to blacks which were once closed, but despite this progress, it is obvious that black role models in education are needed due to problems minorities are experiencing in schools.

The statistics are not good for those few minorities who do choose to go into education, as well as for those already there. For example, the results of Oklahoma's spring 1986 curriculum exams showed the following: 1,999 of 2,731 (or 73 percent) whites passed, 95 of 138 (or 69 percent) native Americans passed, 16 of 26 (or 62 percent) Hispanics passed, but only 53 of 113 (or 47 percent) blacks passed. A test which created problems for minority teachers already in the field was the March 1986 Texas Teachers' Competency Test, which was part of Texas' Reform Law of 1984. Although there was a 96.7 percent passage rate, only 1.1 percent whites failed, whereas 6.0 percent Hispanics failed, and 8.4 percent blacks failed ("Testing Time," 1986). It is therefore apparent that certain measures need to be taken to assure that blacks, including our minority athletes, will have sufficient training and preparation to successfully complete teacher preparation programs once attracted to the field.

Solutions

Retention of College Athletes

Since the majority of black students in the case study college of education are athletes, it has been even more important for this college to encourage high retention and academic success of its athletes. Through effective, sincere, conscientious academic advising, not only through the athletic departments, but in colleges and academic departments, it is possible to stimulate student-athletes to excel. Going beyond Underwood's (1986) suggested characteristics of advisors of athletes, the author lists these specific suggestions for advising minority athletes:

1. Collegiate athletes should be viewed first as students, then as athletes (not vice versa). Concern should be not so much for their athletic eligibility, but for their growth and development as students and adults. Each student should be assessed for his or her level of academic achievement, and remediation developed where needed. At the same

time, every effort should be made to prevent damaging students' self-esteem. They should understand why they might be academically weak, which may require a review of the student's high school experience, or an examination of possible learning disabilities. Overall, honesty is the key, and students should be encouraged not to cover up but to overcome their academic problems.

2. Statistics such as Edwards' (1983) concerning the number of athletes who have gone professional should be presented to student-athletes, then realistic degree plans and career goals outlined for them.
3. Athletes should be viewed as whole persons with certain unique abilities, strengths and goals. Most advisors and professors in the academic arena received their recognition from playing the role of "good student," and they should recognize that athletes' rewards generally come from playing the role of the "good jock." Advisors should attend their students' games, then acknowledge their athletic successes in newsletters, on bulletin boards, and through telephone calls.
Likewise, athletes' academic success should be acknowledged when positive test results and grade cards come out. If students know that someone is looking at their academic achievements (not just for eligibility), they will most likely improve. Similar to the Hawthorn studies in factory production, the mere fact that someone pays attention to them will make production increase.
4. Collegiate athletes should be given opportunities for success in academic, non-athletic settings. For example, athletes in the case study school regularly assist in leading workshops on teen problems for junior high and high school adolescents. Topics range from drugs and alcohol, divorce, family problems and communication, to dating and sex. These workshops give the athletes experience in a classroom setting and an opportunity to succeed off the field or court, as well as to serve as instant role models for youth.
5. The athletes themselves need positive role models. Dr. Harry Edwards, ex-Olympic athlete and black sociologist currently at Berkeley, frequently appears on college campuses. As outlined in his biography, *The Struggle That Must Be*, he tells of his struggles in growing up in East St. Louis, then relates his experiences of being among the first blacks to play college ball at a white institution. Many black athletes have benefitted from his story concerning his awakening to academics and eventual completion of his Ph.D. in sociology.
6. Pictures of black athletes, football programs, and pamphlets about minority student groups on campus should be prominent in advisors' offices to project the attitude that minorities are welcome. This is a necessity when a total of only 20 blacks are majoring in a college, such as in the case study college of education.

7. An effort should be made to develop a personal relationship with minority students and athletes. An advisor does not have to be black, talk "jive," or do special handshakes to develop a relationship of trust and encouragement. As a matter of fact, the author contends that to continue pairing black faculty and counselors with black students, and native American faculty and counselors with native American students, keeps perpetuating the age-old problems of distrust, segregation and racism. Minority students must learn to trust others of a different race and to develop a rapport, or existing barriers will never break down. Retention and remediation programs are important, but often people and their humanistic touch are more important.

Recruitment of Minorities into Teacher Education

The problem of recruitment of minorities in general into teacher education also needs solutions. The field should be made more attractive to minorities through increased salary and status, as well as advancement opportunities. Brown (1987) maintains that "authorities are offering scholarships and student loans with a zeal unknown before, trying to divert more college students into teaching and to keep them there." Such financial attractions should be specifically designated for minorities to make the teaching field a more attractive field. Loans that will be "forgiven" upon teaching a certain number of years, and scholarships to minorities who have exceptional academic credentials and are willing to commit to teaching after graduation could both be powerful incentives to choose careers in education.

It must also be determined how grade point averages and criteria of standardized tests can be met by minority students who may have certain academic deficiencies. Special tutoring programs and remediation courses should be developed to make up for the lack of solid academic backgrounds of those minority students who otherwise could be successful.

Consideration should also be given to allow for alternative criteria for passage of standardized tests required for certification and employment. Some school districts, such as the Dallas Independent School District have modified requirements in order to comply with court orders to hire additional minorities ("DISD Hires Low-scoring Teachers," 1986). Applicants for positions in this district had previously been required to pass a test measuring basic knowledge of subjects in senior high textbooks. However, due to a court ruling requiring an increase in the number of minority teachers, 45 percent of the 4,061 teachers hired between 1980 and 1985 had not passed the test. Seventy-five percent of the blacks hired did not pass the test, and 67.8 percent of the Hispanics hired did not pass. The district also hired 31.3 percent "others" who had failed so that an Equal Education Opportunity Commission suit would not be filed by whites. Despite the fact that these test exceptions existed, the district still has not complied completely with the court order to reach a minimum of 43 percent

black teachers by 1986.

Whether or not test exemptions are an acceptable means of obtaining minority teachers is questionable, but the fact remains that it is important that black children see black teachers. Minority children need to know that the scholars, the disseminators of information and producers of knowledge, can be of any race, and that blacks do not just excel on the football field and in sports.

Conclusion

Perhaps a vicious cycle could be eliminated if we could dispel the myth that athletics is the easiest means of black movement toward success. Perhaps in its place black athletes could seek the goal of mastering the academic game, which would result in achievement, satisfaction, and pride in a variety of settings.

An increase in the number of minorities pursuing careers in education, as well as an improvement in the academic skills and retention of minority collegiate celebrities, could serve to provide powerful role models much different from the Dr. J's, the Refrigerators, and the O.J.'s. These new role models would prove that young blacks could be leaders and become successful in the academic world, as well as in the athletic arena. Colleges of education, through effective advising of minority student-athletes and the recruitment of minorities, could be the catalysts for such change.

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