



Fall 2018

# Institutions Compromising Academics for Athletic and Economic Reward

Sarah M. Pryor  
*Gettysburg College*

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Pryor, Sarah M., "Institutions Compromising Academics for Athletic and Economic Reward" (2018). *Student Publications*. 683.  
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# Institutions Compromising Academics for Athletic and Economic Reward

## **Abstract**

Student athletes are an integral part of NCAA divisions, specifically student athletes of color. Through research regarding athletic and economic statistics, it has been proven that the necessity of talent in athletics is far more important than success in academics. Student athletes are often represented through their role as an athlete first, then followed by the role of the student. Graduation rates, athletic success, and economic profit is all explored in a racial context in this paper in order to further prove the exploitation that institutions involve themselves in.

## **Keywords**

Racial tensions, NCAA, student athlete, academic integrity

## **Disciplines**

Race and Ethnicity | Sociology | Sports Studies

## **Comments**

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sporting.

Sarah Pryor

*Institutions Compromising Academics for Athletic and Economic Reward*

Gettysburg College

Professor Tyeshia Redden

2018

## **Institutions Compromising Academics for Athletic and Economic Reward**

In many areas of our society today, black males are encouraged and expected to excel athletically, yet only do the bare minimum to excel and succeed academically. While ultimately, the individual is at fault for the lack of effort, higher education institutions are often at fault for promoting these social norms. Billy Hawkins, author of *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions*, shares that in his neighborhood as he grew up, “[sports were] a drug for us, we were addicts, athletic junkies needing our daily fix of sport, all the while, dreaming of making it to the pros; dreaming of being free from the burdens of poverty and limitations this town placed on us because of our skin color” (Hawkins, 2013, p. 5). This demonstrates how vital athletics are as an extension of a child’s life, especially a child suffering from racial tensions, racial stereotypes, and racial limitations. Athletics have consistently been used as an escape, specifically for the black male. With principle focus on excelling athletically, academics are often placed secondary. Effects of this phenomenon show greatly throughout high school dropout rates amongst the black community and then continue to develop as college academic and athletic statistics are analyzed. The controversy arises amongst higher education institutions, because they are often aware of this academic struggle, yet choose to only highlight athletic talents of students. Ultimately, black athletes and their involvement in athletics is integral to institutions, such as the NCAA, but the aspect of athletics is overemphasized, which compromises academic integrity and proves the inherent inequality in the system.

The issue of compromising academic integrity is rooted in developmental stages throughout high school, where the social norms of not excelling in academics is acceptable. Much of the issue is that beginning in high school, dropout rates are generally high for black

males, insinuating that not working hard to achieve academic success is adequate. Hawkins (2013) shares that, “Part of it is due to the perception we had about education and the nerds who excelled at it, and also because we viewed it as a long route to achieve the American dream we witnessed the white citizens in our town achieving and enjoying” (p. 2), which clearly exemplifies that the issue is racially rooted. This further represents that throughout Hawkins’s general community and others, education was not viewed as a priority. He then goes on to share how athletics have been seen as the top priority, stating:

Despite our limited options, we all had one thing in common: sport was a common denominator and a rite of passage in our coming into manhood. The majority of black males in my small town were filtered through the culture of sport and played until they either dropped out of school because there was a substantial decrease in academic interest (p. 3).

Historically, the black community has tendencies to reward athletic achievement earlier and more frequently than other types of achievement, such as academics (Leonard, 1986), which encourages the fact that athletics should be placed precedent to academics. This issue is exacerbated as athletes begin to seek recruitment from higher education institutions, such as popular NCAA division colleges and universities. Former University of Alabama head football coach provided a candid remark to the public, stating that he used to “go along with the idea” that his athletes were student athletes. If they were truly student athletes, that would mean the student aspect would have come first, followed by the responsibilities of being an athlete, but that was not the case. He claims that the school is “kidding themselves” by calling their athletes “student athletes”, because the players are evidently athletes first and students second (Leonard, 1986, p. 38).

Student athletes are an integral part of these NCAA divisions and the necessity of their talents is evident throughout several athletic and economic statistics. From the years 2005-2006, black male athletes made up 46% of NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision teams and 58% of Division I basketball teams. While these statistics greatly show how crucial black athletes are to these successful teams, the economic aspect proves their value even further. From March Madness alone, the NCAA profited 548 million dollars (Hawkins, 2013). Specifically, the industry profits off of the immense labor that the athletes put into the game, but they additionally profit off of their public images as professional and popular athletes. Though collegiate athletes are not in the professional leagues, the economic model represents that of the professional industry. Black athletes are necessary for generating revenue for the institutions, specifically, their athletic departments.

At Auburn University, one out of every three black members is a member of the successful Division I football team (Stripling, 2018), clearly exemplifying how evident black athletes are to the institution. With the selling of t-shirts and jerseys from their most popular athletes who are looked at as celebrities in the public eye, the NCAA earns close to 7 million dollars a year. Additionally, black athletes played, started, and scored more than two and a half times as much as white athletes. Statistically, black athletes were on the court for 64% of the time throughout the basketball season and championship (Hawkins, 2013). The distribution of race is evident, clearly showing that black athletes are the bread winners for prominent white institutions that are involved in the NCAA, and more specifically, these black athletes fund their athletic departments (Hawkins, 2013). Though black athletes and their involvement in athletics is integral to institutions, the aspect of athletics is over emphasized which compromises academic integrity and proves the inherent inequality in this system.

Several studies have been done regarding athletes and their compromised academics, including a study regarding 505 athletes from three different NCAA institutions. The study questioned these athletes in regard to whether they have ever felt forced to take less demanding classes, miss classes or exams, have others write their papers, or even cheat in school work. The results of the study show that black athletes are specifically prone to many of these categories, such as majoring in less demanding disciplines, cheating in school work, or taking easy courses. A reported 86 of black athletes shared that their sport made them sacrifice their education due to the level of commitment. While this proves the inadequacy of the education received by the average athlete, it also shows the exploitation of the student athlete as well (Leonard, 1986). The odds that black college athletes feel exploited are 4.92 times as great as the odds of a white athlete feeling exploited by their college (Reheenen, 2011). The black athlete is exploited when he is denied access to proper education (Sailes, 1986). Many of these athletes feel as though they cannot obtain the grades needed, which shows that their academics were not observed regarding their acceptance to college.

Because their athletics were put first, they have been put in a position to struggle academically through their years at the institution (Leonard, 1986). Black students are disproportionately unable to graduate due to many of these reasons and though their athletic eligibility had once been enough to ensure them a spot in college, it is not enough to allow for graduation (Sailes, 1986). The national college graduation rate of black athletes, as of 2007, was 37% with 63% not graduating from their institution (Hawkins, 2013). Much of this is because of the low expectation and the special treatment that they receive. Many universities and their athletic departments, specifically at Auburn University, have allowed for these issues to persist, regardless of the negative influence that has begun impacting academic matters (Stripling, 2018).

This proves the innate exploitation of the student athlete, showing that they are necessary to their institution, but do not receive the education needed.

Because involvement in athletics is integral to institutions and their economic success and reputation, other academic disciplines have been exploited as well as the individual athlete. This is all due to the fact that athletics are over emphasized at these institutions and academic integrity has been compromised time and time again. Routinely, it is evident that economic success is the most important aspect of any institution, especially colleges where enrollment is a crucial element to their economic success. In early 2018, the University of Akron publicly announced that their administration planned to cancel eighty of their academic degree programs in order to solve their budget issues and save money for the future. Removing nearly twenty of their current academic curriculums ultimately included the abolishment of ten Ph.D. programs, thirty-three master's programs, twenty bachelor programs, and seventeen associate degree programs. While these programs did suffer from low enrollment, removing the academic programs exemplifies the lack of care and importance of some crucial academic roles. Exemplifying this even further, the money that the institution was saving from canceling these academic programs, was put into their athletic department. This proves that there truly is an intrinsically dangerous culture surrounding athletics at these competitive NCAA institutions. Specifically, at Akron an entirely new aspect of their athletic department was created. A competitive video gaming team, known as Esports, was created and encouraged for students to join. Esports was considered another sector of the athletic department, essentially creating a new sport for the school to spend their money on and offer to the students. Costing a total of nearly 750,000 thousand dollars, the school compromised their strict budget by opening three facilities for varsity, club, and recreational gamers (Pettit, 2018). This willingness to cancel eighty academic programs but add one athletic



program proves how integral athletics are to NCAA institutions, especially at the expense of academic matters.

When speaking of athletics compromising academic integrity, it is crucial to recognize the personal trauma that has occurred for these athletes as well. In 2015, the University of Maryland moved conferences, going from the Atlantic Coast Conference to the much more competitive and demanding, yet rewarding, Big Ten Conference. With this change, the university's revenue increased by 19 million dollars. Because the stakes of success were much higher, the demands of the players became increasingly high as well. Since then, the University of Maryland, said to have their "academic purity brought down by a football-crazed culture of big money boosters" (Stripling, 2018, para. 11), has been in the spotlight for both physical abuse of players by coaches and additionally violating Title IX. The stories of mistreatment began when student-athlete McNair suffered convulsions and seizures due to extreme heat-exhaustion. Warning signs came much before the seizures, but his pain was belittled by his coaches and fellow teammates. It was the nature and culture of the football team to ignore these problems and to keep fighting. Ultimately when McNair passed away, it was evident that there had been abuse of players including verbal assaults and physical punishment along with exercise requirement (Zimbalist, 2018). This mistreatment of players simply in order to encourage athletic success is evident, showing how lives are being compromised due to the high standards of the NCAA.

These student-athletes are recruited and promised an education in exchange for their participation in athletics at these prestigious NCAA schools, but this promise ultimately has not been fulfilled for many. Another empty fulfillment is the dream of playing professionally. The NCAA has reported that less than one-tenth of 1% of high school athletes playing football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and soccer continue on after high school (and college) to play

professionally (Levy, 2017), further proving the issue of focusing on athletics. After these athletes are left without their sport to rely on for a source of talent, fame, and in some cases, income, they are left with nothing. The reliance on athletics for a mere ten years of one's life is dangerously setting them up for failure, and it is very easy for these institutions of higher education to inflict otherwise. In an effort to solve this issue, programs such as Athletes for Better Education and Athletes for Academic Success have been created where student athletes from various high school across the nation can become involved in promoting education throughout athletics. The two programs have equal missions, to provide the most comprehensive sports and educational experience by offering opportunities to excel at both. Some of these opportunities include learning skills to develop healthy competition on the playing fields, working on interpersonal growth, and other social development skills (Jones, N.d). In order to reap the benefits of these programs, such as having professional athletes serve as role models or having sessions at local colleges, the students must obtain a minimum grade point average (Sailes, 1986). This encourages academic success amongst the players, which hopefully can instill academic priorities when in college as well.

The studies, reports, and personal accounts of exploitation represent a series of systematic inequalities of collegiate athletic programs. According to Leonard (1986), the exploitation of the black athlete is a “multi-faceted intercollegiate sports phenomenon [that] contains fiscal, educational, racial, social and moral overtones” (p. 38), which demonstrates that there are several aspects of the lives of black athletes that need to be solved, and the change begins with the institutions. The promise of education that these students expect to receive from their institution of higher education often end up in low graduation rates and inequalities amongst racial disparities. This represents a social and cultural change that must begin with the institutions

realizing their limits. There must be far greater measures that are taken amongst athletic participation and college degree completion. It is said that if one is promised four years of the very best athletics, four years of the very best education must be supplemental.

In our society today, it is crucial that these student athletes, specifically black student athletes, can come together to form a community of individuals who can serve as role models and become leaders across all aspects of society, whether that be athletics, or economics, politics, education etc. (Sailes, 1986). Without working together to stop this systematic inequality regarding the compromise of academics for athletics, a feedback loop occurs. This cycle of feedback will cause for black athletes of society so feel forced to adjust to societal norms, where skipping classes to attend an extra workout or cheating on a test to save time studying is acceptable. By not conforming to these societal norms of these higher institutions, the inherent inequality of this system can be solved. Ultimately, athletics are microcosm of society and these institutions provide context for society outside of the academic buildings. These institutions shape how society can view crucial aspects of life such as cultural practices, ideologies, and social interactions (Hawkins, 2013), therefore there must be a change to this system. Ultimately, there is an inherent structural contradiction regarding the importance of academics and athletics that must be solved. Black athletes and their involvement in athletics will remain crucial to institutions, but without a change, institutions will continue to feel as though they have the right to compromise individual academic integrity and mistreatment of others.

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