

DIVISION I BLACK STUDENT ATHLETES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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For many, the past several months have been eye-opening. There has been an unprecedented awakening to the injustices of underserved communities, racial biases, and systemic racism. For others, there has been merely a resurfacing of the violent ideals that have been a part of this country for centuries. Most of us have been educated since we were young children with one idealistic notion: “America —land of the free and home of the brave” —is a place where dreams can become realities no matter your race, religion or background. One institution that continues to reach and extend across cultures is the influence of sport. The sports enterprise has shown the power to transform and impact our society in unique ways. As the world of college sports has restarted across the country after being brought to a screeching halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we cannot neglect the ongoing need for racial equity and advancement within collegiate athletics.

Educators, administrators, coaches, and fans [have seen student-athletes using their platforms to raise awareness on social issues](#). This activism has come with both criticism and praise. Athletes across the globe are often presented with an unsettling dilemma—they are expected to perform at high levels while keeping their social opinions to themselves. For most spectators, it can be difficult to understand the plight specific to Black athletes in higher education. On one end of the spectrum, student-athletes at the Division I level are receiving a free college experience. No one is devaluing that certainty. College tuition, room, and board are indeed expensive. However, student-athletes are providing a service to colleges and universities, making the institutions millions of dollars and raising the campus profile in the process. As higher education leaders, it is our responsibility to better equip Black student-athletes as they continue to navigate their development in a fast-changing world. In the sphere of college athletics, Black athletes continue to ask audiences, leaders, and supporters to hear their voices and hear them clearly. They are not here simply for entertainment. Black athletes are asking to be seen and heard for who they are, and no longer just what they do.

As we move forward in higher education and college athletics, we must identify steps that can be taken towards ensuring that Black student-athletes succeed:

1. Acknowledge the problem

In the recruiting process, student-athletes are enlisted for their athletic ability with the expectation that they will make a positive impact on their program and ultimately receive a college education. This expectation fails to acknowledge the racial and cultural background many athletes come from. Additionally, what is often forgotten is the psychological effect of uprooting Black students from everything they’ve ever known to an unfamiliar culture with new [surroundings](#). [We need more systems in place](#) to help support this transition for Black students entering a different environment replete with new cultures and practices. Black student-athletes are in need of intentional services to further expand identity development and awareness, along with critical thinking strategies for day-to-day experiences during their college years and beyond. This is not the first time we’ve seen [social unrest](#) in our country with a direct impact on college athletics and it will not be the last. There are many examples of student-athletes from across the nation showing their disapproval with the state of social justice in our country. In some cases, student-athletes have [threatened to opt out of the 2020-2021 season](#) if social justice measures are not met. Meaningful conversations have to take place in our classrooms as well as in our locker rooms with true intentions to raise awareness on race, equity, and anti-Blackness. Students should not feel alone in their advocacy, they should not be punished for standing for what they believe in, and they should be offered support as they navigate contemporary social issues that threaten their ideas of safety and intimidate their livelihood. Many universities have added race related issues to curriculum, so these matters are being discussed and studied, but they need to be further examined within the context of college athletics. Black student-athletes often have to navigate between identities of athlete, scholar, and social being on college campuses with little guidance. This can create social isolation and can negatively impact their sense of belonging. Leadership in athletics (administrators, coaches, and staff) have the opportunity to educate student-athletes in their programs about life beyond sports, and what the future will hold during and after their collegiate careers.

2. Provide student-athletes with literacy for life after sport

Student-athletes who compete at the Division I level are awarded scholarships that cover tuition, room, and board. With the upcoming legislation by the NCAA to potentially provide student-athletes with proceeds from their [name, image, and likeness](#), knowledge for life after sport is in need more than ever before. As higher education leaders we have responsibilities of our own, but we can’t expect 18-22-year-old young adults to manage their cost of attendance income, as well as income from outside entities without further guidance. There has been a strong focus on student-athletes [maximizing their brand](#), when in reality there should also be a focus on educating young adults on how to manage more than their social media accounts. Student-athletes average nearly 20 hours per week between practice, film, and strength and conditioning. Another large amount of time is spent in the classroom and other academically related responsibilities; therefore student-athletes are somewhat limited in their work experience and lessons that their classmates have the opportunity to obtain. As higher education leaders it is part of our duty to provide tools to help these young adults receive a foundation to set them up for financial success.

3. Increase Black representation in Leadership Positions

Our leadership should mirror the representation of our student-athletes, but this is not the [case](#). As demographics continue to change, it is our responsibility as higher education leaders to set the example for representation. The absence of Black individuals in leadership positions within higher education can portray the thought that Black people are not qualified for or capable of fulfilling these roles. That message can be internalized for Black students and can create impostor syndrome where individuals can begin to doubt their skills and abilities; therefore, becoming apprehensive of being seen as an impersonator. This creates a society where Black people in athletic circles hold themselves back from seeking more. By having Black representation in leadership positions, we can take the shock factor away and normalize it. As it stands, it can be challenging to keep showing up in places where there are minimal numbers of people who look like you and/or have similar cultural experiences. According to the 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card released by The Institute of Diversity and Ethics in Sports (TIDES) Black people held 8.7% of Athletic Director positions and 9.3% of Assistant Athletic Director positions at the Division I level. Representation matters. Black individuals who hold positions in athletics are either not being given the chance to advance, or unconscious biases are still impacting the hiring processes. There is never a better time than the present to critically look at how diversity is being represented and how leaders are encouraging conformity or development. Just as we continue to provide safe spaces for student-athletes, we must provide the same structure for those in leadership roles. Over time, this can create a culture of inclusion and innovation from different perspectives and walks of life leading us towards continued progress and success. This can also hold true in non-athletic circles. As we remain diligent to push the social justice narrative and dismantle forms of institutional racism, we can be hopeful to stay on the path towards inclusive excellence and reflect this in all walks of life.

4. Create safe spaces

In a time where chaos seems to be surrounding us from all aspects of life, students in higher education are in need of places of refuge more than ever. We need to secure spaces where Black student-athletes can feel safe, valued, and respected. We all can exercise empathy, but we are also required to learn the skills to be able to talk about real world issues. We have to be able to acknowledge that what people are feeling is real, and when major incidents occur—whether a global pandemic and the impact of COVID-19, or the ongoing series of racial injustices in our country, students need a safe space to be able to talk. We have to be willing to commit to a lifelong journey of learning about one another and be willing to continue these conversations when it is no longer a trend. There is no stopping point to being able to transform our practices around meaningful forms of inclusion.

As leaders in higher education, we can continue to serve through empowering one another, our students, and encouraging the next generation of leaders. The world of education and sport is a powerful platform that can create nationwide transformation. The task will not be easy, but continued change is necessary for advancement and growth. The ideals and opportunities that we want to see in our communities can start with taking ownership and working towards an inclusive future of equal opportunity in the world of college athletics. Black student-athletes need to know they belong. All student-athletes need to know they belong, and the work towards change is more important now than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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