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MAKE-IT-YOURS: BLACK MALE STUDENT-ATHLETES RECOUNT THEIR DIVISION II EXPERIENCES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

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Dedication

To GOD be the glory! I must first and foremost dedicate this doctoral degree to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for sustaining me through this rigorous and transformative journey. GOD's Word tells us that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains, and nothing will be impossible (Matthew 17:20). Thank You, GOD, for the strength, grace, and power to endure and finish this race. Your promises in *Jeremiah 29:11*, *Matthew 6:33*, *Philippians 4:13*, and *Proverbs 3:5-8* have been my anchors. This accomplishment is a testimony of Your faithfulness. To my amazing wife, Candace, and our incredible sons, Darnell Jr. and Dalvin—thank you for your unwavering love, patience, and support through every long night, every moment of sacrifice, and every prayer. You are my inspiration, and I love you more than words can express. I also dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my beloved mother, Imogene Smith. Your strength and perseverance shaped the man I am today. I know you're smiling down on me from heaven, and I carry your spirit with me always. To my father, Reverend Dr. Randolph Smith, and his wife, Tonya—thank you for your constant prayers, wisdom, and encouragement. Your faith and guidance have been a pillar in my life. To my sister, Yolanda Chatman, brother-in-law Tony, niece Sierra, nephew Kris, and brother Randy Jr.—thank you for keeping me grounded, motivated, and believing in me. To my mother-in-law, Annette Figures, and the memory of my father-in-law, Theo Figures—thank you for your prayers and encouragement throughout this journey. And to my brother-in-law, Terrell Figures—thank you for your continued grace and steadfast support. Finally, I dedicate this study to every Black male student-athlete who has ever questioned whether their story matters—It does! This dissertation is not just my achievement; it belongs to every one of you who lifted me up, prayed for me, pushed me, and stood by me. I am forever grateful.

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Abstract

Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) navigate the intersections of race, athletics, and higher education. While most research focuses on NCAA Division I, little examines their experiences at the Division II level. This qualitative study fills that gap by exploring how Division II BMSAs navigate academic, athletic, and social environments, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that shape their journeys. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM), this study amplifies BMSAs' voices to expose systemic inequities in collegiate athletics and higher education. Through semi-structured interviews with six participants, the findings are organized into four key themes: *Rethinking Athletic Success*, *Division II as a Supportive Family*, *Sports Don't Last Forever: Developing a Plan for Success* and *Navigating Hostile Territory at HWIs*. Findings reveal that Division II BMSAs face limited resources, racial microaggressions, and underrepresentation among faculty and coaches. However, they persist through mentorship, peer support, and self-advocacy. Participants emphasized strategic academic and career planning, the supportive nature of Division II athletics, and the enduring impact of systemic racism. This study broadens the understanding of BMSAs' experiences at Division II HWIs, offering insights for policy, institutional practices, and future research to foster more equitable and supportive environments.

Keywords: Black male student-athletes, Division II, Historically White Institutions, Critical Race Theory, collegiate athletics, systemic inequities

Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine having to constantly prove your self-worth or justify your existence. Jake, a Division II Black male student-athlete (BMSA), frequently encountered stereotypes and microaggressions that shaped his experiences both in and out of the classroom. He talked in earnest about the stigmas surrounding BMSAs and the assumptions that they were naturally gifted in sports but lacked academic aptitude. Jake could feel that these narratives were debilitating and undermined the achievements of BMSAs who excel in areas outside of their sport:

> The world sees us as non-intelligent people. So, when African Americans actually succeed in something like school, they look at it like, oh, there's no chance you can do that. Or it's no way this is actually possible. You're cheating or someone's helping you.

Throughout our discussion, Jake described how these preconceived labels manifested in his daily life as a Division II student-athlete. He shared his vivid encounter with racial profiling:

> At my Division II institution in the Midwest region of the United States…there are not really a lot of African Americans around…Me and my African American friends walked to the store and when we walked in the store everybody's eyes shifted to us. They followed us around to make sure that we were not stealing anything and that we were not doing something we're not supposed to be doing. And it was just like, for what?

Jake expressed deep feelings toward his racialized experiences and argued that he feels that he must constantly prove his worth beyond the limitations imposed by stereotypes. His experiences are not isolated but rather reflective of the broader challenges faced by Black male student- athletes (BMSAs) at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). By centering the voices of

Jake and the other participants, this study illuminates the systemic barriers BMSAs navigate and the broader implications of racialized experiences in collegiate athletics and higher education.

Overview of the Chapter

This qualitative study provides insights into the experiences of NCAA Division II BMSAs at HWIs. Specifically, this work uses narratives from six BMSAs to highlight their struggles, challenges, successes, and achievements and to understand how race and power dynamics operate in spaces traditionally dominated by majoritarian groups—in this case, the dominant racial group – white people – and the social structures that uphold their interests, maintain their status quo, and societal norms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The organization of this chapter is structured to ensure clarity and coherence for all readers. First, I outline and describe the background of the qualitative dissertation study. This entails contextualizing the experiences of BMSAs at Division II HWIs, discussing the historical and contemporary racial and sociopolitical dynamics at these institutions, explaining how majoritarian narratives influence the perceptions of BMSAs, and highlighting previous research on racialized experiences of BMSAs in college athletics. After the description of the background, I outline the historical, social, and theoretical context of the focus of the dissertation and its significance toward BMSAs. I also highlight existing gaps in the research that this study seeks to address. Next, I discuss the purpose of the study and explain the research aims and its contribution toward research. Following the purpose of the study, I discuss the significance of my study and outline my overarching research questions as well as the definition of terms to provide clarity around key concepts. To conclude this chapter, I discuss the organization of the study and provide a road map for the structure of the rest of my study.

Background: Racial Exclusion and the Struggle for Integration in Colleges

Many HWIs were resistant to racial integration post- the second Morrill Act and 1960s Civil Rights era (Martin, 2010; Moore, 2017). Several Black students were denied admission, excluded from their athletics programs, and were subjected to prejudice, racism, and discrimination (Hodge, 2015). Martin (2010) described the conditions by which Black athletes had to abide by to compete at HWIs in the segregated South. He expressed that between 1890 and the mid-1960s, HWIs either did not permit Black athletes the option to be admitted to their institutions or, if they were admitted, they faced racist reactions from the public, community, and campus.

Many HWIs between 1890 and the 1960s participated in "gentlemen's agreements" (Martin, 2010). This was an unofficial national policy governing competition primarily in the sports of football and men's basketball. Essentially, it barred Black people from competing in sports against schools in the traditional south region of the United States. If Black athletes did compete under the guise of the "gentleman's agreement," institutions were limited on the number of Black athletes that were permitted to compete. Post-Civil War, Jim Crow laws, and the success of Black athletes, helped set the stage for "gentlemen's agreements" (Moore, 2017).

Black athletes who were successful at their sport were portrayed as a threat to white Americans. For example, Martin (2010) states that "In 1892, black boxing champion George Dixon successfully defended his featherweight title against a white challenger, provoking numerous complaints from influential local whites that his victory sent a dangerous message to the Black Community" (p. 13). The threat of defeat evoked feelings of pride. Ideas such as white Southerners succumbing to Northern Yankees was unthinkable within the inherent culture of the South during the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Black people were portrayed as, and

believed to be, inferior beings (Martin, 2010; Moore, 2017). Where sport was one of the major avenues to develop "men," it also represented the epitome of masculinity and opportunities of redemption. Martin (2010) expresses that many Southerners (South of the Mason-Dixon Line) saw sport and competition against Northerners as opportunities to redeem their ancestors who lost or were lost in the Civil War. Furthermore, "defeat of a northern rival could also affirm the superiority of such southern traditions as honor and chivalry" (Martin, 2010, p. 14).

The color line, a phrase used to identify racial segregation in the United States after the abolition of slavery, and the implementation of the Jim Crow Laws protected southern tradition and values, asserted power, and reasserted white supremacy (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Feagin, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Martin (2010) explains that individuals who have significant influence (e.g., university presidents, politicians, major donors), would use the backing of the law as reasoning to exclude Black people from participating in competition against white athletes. Several scholars have argued that sport creates a platform to reinforce value systems on a national platform (Hawkins et al., 2017; Singer, 2019). In spite of the history of injustice, many Black athletes persisted.

The Contemporary Climate of Black Athletes at HWIs

Like Jake's vignette that opens this introductory chapter, the experiences of Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) have been widely documented and explored by scholars (Bimper, 2015; Feagin, 2006; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2019). Bimper (2015) explored the concept of"lifting the veil" to examine colorblind racism in BMSAs. He argued that colorblind ideology – the claim of not seeing race — perpetuates systemic inequalities and shapes the lived experiences of BMSAs.

Oseguera (2010) investigated the academic success of BMSAs despite the stereotypes and systemic barriers undermining their intellectual capabilities. She found that BMSAs frequently experience stereotype threat, fearing that they may conform to negative assumptions about their intelligence. She emphasized that BMSAs are often perceived as athletically superior but intellectually inferior, a stereotype that extends beyond athletics and influences their broader academic and social interactions at predominately white institutions (PWIs).

Feagin (2006) examined the systemic nature of racism and its historical and contemporary relevance in American society. He argued that racism persists and is deeply rooted within American institutions, including sports and educational institutions. Similarly, Singer (2019) analyzed BMSA experiences in collegiate athletics, highlighting how systemic racism affects both their academic and athletic experiences while attending HWIs. Expanding on the arguments of Feagin (2006) and Oseguera (2010), Singer (2019) also critiqued the exploitative nature of college athletics, asserting that BMSAs generate significant revenue for universities while receiving insufficient academic and social support.

While existing research has extensively documented the experiences of BMSAs, most studies focus on Division I programs, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics manifest in Division II. This distinction is crucial, as BMSAs at HWIs navigate unique challenges distinct from their white teammates, often shaped by racial disparities, stereotypes, and systemic racism in collegiate sports (Hodge, 2015). Historically, Black athletes faced overt racism during the Civil Rights era, including resistance to racial integration and institutional mechanisms that upheld racial barriers in athletics. Although some may argue that explicit racism has diminished, Cooper (2012) argues that the modern Black male athlete still contends with unconscious bias and covert racism, which continues to shape their experiences. Despite the

perception that racism in sports has declined, Black athletes still remain at the forefront of activism and continue to advocate for change (Agyemang et al., 2010). For example, scholars have pointed to the underrepresentation of Black head coaches in collegiate athletics and the ongoing exploitation of Black athletes, prompting discussions on fair compensation structure that support BMSAs (Singer, 2019). One significant aspect of Black athlete activism is their ability to successfully organize and amplify opinions on national platforms, challenging social inequities that have plagued Black athletes (Agyemang, 2012).

Recent examples illustrate the impact of Black athlete activism. In 2020, Kylin Hill, a former running back at Mississippi State University (an HWI), played a key role in pushing for the removal of the Confederate emblem from Mississippi's state flag. Hill publicly stated he would not play for Mississippi State if the flag was not changed, contributing to broader calls for legislative action. His activism ultimately helped accelerate the flag's redesign (Hartmann et al., 2022). Chuba Hubbard is another example. In 2020, Hubbard, a star running back at Oklahoma State University (a HWI), publicly criticized his head coach, Mike Gundy, for wearing a t-shirt featuring the logo of OAN (One America News), a network known for controversial right-wing rhetoric. His activism led to internal conversations within the program about racial sensitivity and institutional accountability (McGuire et al., 2022). Another example includes Justin Fields. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Justin Fields, a star quarterback at Ohio State, led a petition calling for the reinstatement of the Big Ten football season. While his advocacy was primarily about athletics, it demonstrated the increasing influence of Black athletes in shaping institutional decision-making at HWIs (Sports, 2025).

The emergence of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rights offers new economic opportunities. College athletics is a lucrative industry with high-profit margins for the NCAA

and individual universities. Although these institutions can generate great profit margins, BMSAs have been historically limited in their ability to see any of that return, although they comprise the majority of the rosters for NCAA Division I revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball. In fact, according to Bartlett (2022), popular college athletes' NIL are used to sell video games, merchandise, and other items:

> Black athletes bring in a substantial amount of revenue that supports entire athletic programs. This newfound freedom will allow Black athletes to choose athletic programs without the fear of losing their marketability because they can capitalize nationally on their NIL rights from any university. (Bartlett, 2022, p. 198)

Academically, BMSAs often contend with persistent assumptions of academic inferiority, reflecting broader structural inequities (Bartlett, 2022). Black athletes continue leveraging their platforms to address racial injustice and inequities even as institutions grapple with the balance between athlete advocacy and maintaining a politically neutral image (Singer et al., 2017). This ongoing struggle for racial equity in sports highlights the critical role that HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) have played in fostering Black athletic talent, providing culturally affirming spaces, and serving as pillars of advocacy and empowerment for Black athletes.

Significance of HBCUs in Black Athletic Development

In comparison to HWIs, between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, most Black athletes attended HBCUs and faced challenges accessing higher education at HWIs (Cooper, 2018). HBCUs are defined as any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency (Cooper,

2018).These colleges and universities opened prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, during a time where the United States was governed by laws segregating whites from Blacks (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). HBCUs showcased high levels of competitive sporting events like football and basketball and "operated under the guidance of culturally empowering mission statements designed to address the unique educational and sociocultural needs of African American students and foster their holistic development" (Cooper, 2013, p. 308).

Furthermore, HBCUs provided culturally relevant curricula (e.g., widespread courses on African history), artifacts (e.g., naming of buildings after famous African Americans), and an overwhelming number of faculty, staff, and administrators (Cooper, 2013). One historical example is when Texas Western won the National Championship in men's basketball in 1966, it changed the game forever, and the viewpoints of many in society, about Black athletes (Martin, 2010). Texas Western's (now University of Texas at El Paso) all-Black lineup defeated a goliath opponent, the number one ranked Kentucky Wildcats, a team composed of Adolph Rupp's all-white lineup in the NCAA men's basketball championship, on television. The importance of Texas Western's historic game had to do with place and time. Texas Western was a member of the University of Texas System, which was a strong proponent of Jim Crow laws and segregation during that era (Martin, 2010). In addition, Texas Western was a member of the Border Conference, in which some members of the conference competed with Black Americans on their respective teams. The school was in a bit of a conundrum having to balance both the political and public pressures but ultimately decided to permit African Americans to play for the institution.

Adolph Rupp, the head coach of the Kentucky team, represented the social groups and ideologies of states south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Texas Western's team represented the future and the changing landscape of racial tolerance in the country. Defeating Rupp and his team on a

national stage aided in breaking down stereotypes and penetrating southern ideologies that served to marginalize and disenfranchise Black-Americans at HWIs and their lived experiences.

After the Texas Western and Kentucky game aired on national television, Martin (2010) asserted that there was a great shift from HBCUs to HWIs. Seeing the success of Black athletes on national television against the highly rated Kentucky Wildcats, coaches at HWIs started to recruit Black athletes in an effort to contribute toward their team success. The shift helped break down racial barriers during times of racial segregation in society (Cooper, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2017; Martin, 2010). With increased racial integration over the past 60 years at HWIs, HBCUs saw a significant decline in the number of prominent student-athletes electing to participate in athletics on their campuses, choosing instead to compete for elite programs within the NCAA's national platform (Cooper, 2017; Hodge, 2015). Although prominent Black athletes chose and continue to choose this pathway, there are still barriers they face at HWIs.

Narratives are not new in qualitative research focusing on BMSA experiences across colleges. For example, Cooper (2013) examined the BMSA experience at HBCUs in order to understand how unique educational and sociocultural environments at HBCUs influence BMSAs' educational experiences in college. Findings revealed that the sociocultural environments at HBCUs played a critical role in shaping the educational experiences of BMSAs, offering them a sense of community, cultural affirmation, and identity development. In addition, HBCUs provided a supportive foundation that helped student-athletes balance their academic and athletic challenges. Furthermore, he found that BMSAs who attended HWIs felt a sense of isolation because those institutions lacked cultural affirmation and adequate support systems.

Similar to Cooper's work (2013), Bailey et al. (2017) sought to understand the experiences that influence African American male student-athletes' college choice, career goals,

and academic persistence at a Division II Historically Black College. Bailey et al. (2017) wanted to understand the ongoing relevance of HBCUs and how it prepared African American student-athletes for life after sports. The findings in his study revealed BMSAs felt HBCUs presented a space of belonging, where they could receive affirmation of their racial and cultural identity, which was not immediately apparent at PWIs.

Further research like Singer's (2019) work, focused on the complexities of the BMSA experience at Division I HWIs, highlights how institutional racism, racial stereotypes, and prioritization of athletics over academics contributed to the miseducation of BMSAs. His findings revealed that there are institutional and systemic barriers that hinder the holistic development and academic success of BMSAs, including insufficient academic advising, lack of faculty support, and leaders that they can model themselves after.

Given the varied experiences of BMSAs across institutional types, it is important to understand the broader collegiate athletic landscape, including the structure of the NCAA and its divisions, which shape the opportunities and challenges faced by student-athletes at different levels of competition.

Understanding the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): Divisions I, II, and III

The NCAA has long been a source of both admiration and criticism among college sports fans. Established in 1906, the organization serves as the governing body for collegiate athletics, overseeing policies and regulations for a vast network of schools, sports, and organizations across North America (Satterfield et al., 2015). Today, the NCAA supports more than 500,000 college athletes across approximately 1,100 member schools across all 50 states. More than 54,000 of these athletes compete in the NCAA's 90 championships spanning 24 sports and three divisions: Division I, II, and III (NCAA Recruiting Facts, n.d.).

The primary distinctions among these divisions lie in how institutions fund their athletic programs and the level of national exposure they receive. Division I schools, which typically have the largest student populations, also manage the most substantial athletic budgets and offer the greatest number of scholarships. With 355 colleges and universities in its membership, Division I supports more than 6,000 athletic teams and provides opportunities for over 204,000 student-athletes each year (NCAA Recruiting Facts, n.d.). In contrast, Division II institutions operate with fewer financial resources or choose to place less emphasis on athletics. While still highly competitive, these programs generally prioritize a balance between athletics, academics, and broader campus involvement (Our Division II Story, n.d.). Division III, on the other hand, does not offer athletic scholarships but provides student-athletes the opportunity to compete in a competitive sports environment while focusing on their academic and personal development (Our Division III Story, n.d.).

At its core, the NCAA is a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (Overview, n.d.). The association upholds values of diversity, inclusion, and gender equity, striving to create an environment that fosters equitable participation and academic achievement for all student-athletes (Inclusion, n.d.). These principles are embedded within the broader NCAA structure, which includes member institutions, athletic conferences, governance bodies (such as boards, committees, and cabinets), and affiliated organizations (such as coaches' associations). Member institutions, conferences, and the NCAA national office collectively share a commitment to key principles: excellence in both academics and athletics; a collegiate athletics model that integrates academic and social experiences; and the role of intercollegiate sports in strengthening institutional identity and community.

Additionally, the NCAA promotes an inclusive culture that provides equitable opportunities for student-athletes, coaches, and administrators from diverse backgrounds (Inclusion, n.d.). However, the extent to which these values are successfully implemented varies across divisions and institutions, significantly shaping the student-athlete experience. While the NCAA's mission promotes fairness and inclusion, systemic challenges within collegiate athletics complicate these efforts.

For instance, in 2019, the NCAA's most comprehensive study ever conducted on student-athlete experiences, titled Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Learning of Students (GOALS), study highlighted disparities in the sense of belonging among student-athletes of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (NCAA GOALS Study, 2019). When asked if they felt a sense of belonging at their respective colleges, 69 percent of Black Division I student-athletes responded affirmatively, compared to 80 percent of their white counterparts. Similar trends emerged across other divisions: in Division II, 67 percent of Black student-athletes felt a sense of belonging, compared to 79 percent of white student-athletes. In Division III, the numbers were 69 percent for Black student-athletes, and 85 percent for white student-athletes. Overall, while 82 percent of white student-athletes reported a sense of belonging at their institution, only 68 percent of Black student-athletes felt they belonged, revealing a clear disparity in their collegiate experiences.

Additionally, when student-athletes were asked about their perception of inclusivity within their institutions, responses varied across divisions and demographics. In Division I, 74 percent of all men believed their institution fostered an inclusive environment, compared to 65 percent of white women and 59 percent of non-white women. In Division II, 74 percent of men reported feeling included, along with 71 percent of white women and 67 percent of non-white

women. On the other hand, Division III showed the highest overall inclusivity ratings, with 80 percent of all men, 75 percent of white women, and 69 percent of non-white women expressing that their institution provided an inclusive environment (NCAA Goals Study, 2020).

These findings underscore the complex and often unequal experiences of student-athletes within the NCAA system. While the organization's stated mission emphasizes inclusivity and support, the data suggests that racial and gender disparities persist, particularly in student-athletes' sense of belonging and institutional inclusivity. Addressing these issues requires a deeper examination of the structural and cultural factors that contribute to these disparities within collegiate athletics. While these disparities persist across all NCAA divisions, a closer examination of Division II offers critical insight into how institutional structures, resource allocation, and campus culture influence the experiences of Black student-athletes and the broader student-athlete population at this level.

Understanding the Division II Context

The leading motto for NCAA Division II intercollegiate athletics is *Make It Yours*. This slogan brings the Division II student-athlete experience to life in a way that instills pride, engagement and community buy-in through a custom-fit approach to athletics and education rather than a one-size-fits-all (NCAA Make It Yours, n.d.). The NCAA intentionally underlined the letters O-U-R-S in 'Yours' to signal to student-athletes that when they "Make It Yours," they make it "Ours" (NCAA Make It Yours, n.d.). This motto suggests that by "Making It Yours," student-athletes are finding a place to develop a sense of belonging – bridging the individual with the collective experience.

The NCAA Division II prioritizes graduation by emphasizing academic commitment and preparing student-athletes for life beyond sports. Athletes can earn scholarships for their athletic abilities while competing for national championships, maintaining a balance between high-level competition and academic success. This approach ensures that athletic performance remains important but not overwhelming (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.).

Rather than defining the college experience solely through sports, Division II encourages student-athletes to engage in academics, social life, and extracurricular activities, fostering a well-rounded experience. The intimate campus setting allows athletes to build lifelong friendships with both peers and non-athletes, promoting a sense of inclusion and belonging (Inclusion, n.d.). University leadership, including presidents who personally engage with students, strengthens this supportive environment by making student-athletes feel recognized and valued beyond their athletic contributions (Nite, 2012; Our Division II Story, n.d).

Student-athletes in Division II benefit from personalized academic experiences, forming meaningful relationships with professors and advisors that enhance their success. A close-knit campus ensures that their academic, personal, and emotional needs are met, treating them as whole individuals rather than just athletes (Our Division II Story, n.d.). Furthermore, coaches, professors, and staff take a holistic approach to development, helping athletes build professional resumes alongside their athletic skills. Through active participation in various aspects of college life, student-athletes gain diverse experiences and life skills, equipping them for successful transitions into careers both in and outside of sports (Our Division II Story, n.d.).

The Division II philosophy embraces a balanced approach toward supporting student-athletes. This idea encourages each Division II member to reach their highest potential in the sports they love to play, the academic goals they choose to pursue, the engagement with their

campus and local communities, and the personal development and wellness they need to succeed in life after college (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.). Another priority for Division II includes for member institutions to foster an inclusive culture in which people of all backgrounds are respected and given the opportunity to provide input and participate. The commitment to a holistic student-athlete experience aligns with broader discussions on the challenges faced by BMSAs at HWIs, particularly in terms of inclusion, support, racialized experiences, and preparation for life beyond college (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.).

While Division II promotes inclusion and personal development, BMSAs often navigate racialized experiences, varying levels of institutional support, and barriers to full participation in academic and social spaces (Bimper, 2015; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). These challenges highlight the need for a deeper exploration of how Division II institutions can better foster an environment that truly supports the success and well-being of BMSAs, which is the focus of this study's problem statement.

Statement of the Problem

Black male student-athletes face numerous obstacles deeply rooted in systemic racism that shape their academic and athletic experiences in complex ways (Bimper, 2020; Feagin, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2017; Singer, 2019). As they navigate multiple worlds and identities – student, athlete, Black, and male – their experiences are often framed through a deficit lens by majoritarian groups and in the media. These narratives reinforce racialized stereotypes that not only misrepresent BMSAs but also undermine their career aspirations beyond sports (Singer, 2019). Despite the progress and advancements made in collegiate athletics, BMSAs continue to encounter racism, racial bias, unconscious stereotypes, and systemic inequities that hinder their holistic development (Hawkins et al., 2017). Dominant narratives perpetuate the idea that

BMSAs are athletically superior, yet academically inept (Oseguera, 2010). Furthermore, research suggests that HWIs contribute to these challenges by maintaining policies, ideologies, and structures that marginalize people of color (Feagin, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2017; Singer, 2019). Faculty perceptions also play a critical role, as some faculty at HWIs view BMSAs as intellectually inferior, reinforcing deficit-based narratives that can undermine their academic potential (Johnson & Jackson, 2017). These perceptions raise critical concerns and important questions about the role of faculty in shaping the student-athlete experience and whether they serve as advocates or barriers to BMSAs' academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand the existing body of literature on BMSAs by addressing a critical research gap: the lived experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs. While much of the scholarship on BMSAs has centered on Division I athletics, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how BMSAs in Division II navigate their academic, athletic, and social environments. By highlighting the systemic inequities embedded within collegiate athletics and higher education, this research aims to illuminate the unique challenges, opportunities, and support systems that shape the experiences of Division II BMSAs. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM), this study amplifies BMSA voices, acknowledging that race and racism are deeply entrenched in higher education and athletic institutions in ways that often go unrecognized in majoritarian narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do Black male student-athletes at Division II Historically White Institutions navigate their academic and athletic experiences?
2. What challenges and opportunities shape the college experiences of Black male student-athletes at Division II Historically White Institutions?

By centering the lived experiences of BMSAs, this research seeks to inform policies, institutional practices, and support structures that promote their holistic success and well-being in Division II athletics and beyond.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT will be explored in greater depth in the following literature review and methodology chapters; however, it is important to introduce it here as a foundation for this study. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, CRT was developed by legal scholars seeking to challenge the ways race and racism are embedded within American legal and social structures. Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda built upon the foundations of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) but argued that CLS failed to adequately address race and systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT developed not only in response to the persistent injustices, but also the limitations of traditional civil rights approaches, which primarily focused on incremental legal progress rather than addressing deeper, systemic inequalities (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Rooted in the work of lawyers and activists, CRT provided a new framework for combating institutional racism in the justice system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Derrick Bell (1995) is widely recognized as the originator of CRT, with his work focusing on civil rights injustices faced by people of color in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. CRT helps explain how white supremacy and racism contribute to contemporary disadvantages for Black

individuals and the racially oppressive institutions connected to sports (Brown, 2017; Feagin, 2006).

Ladson-Billings (2013), in applying CRT to education, outlined five core tenets:

1. Systemic Racism – Racism is a permanent and pervasive aspect of society.
2. Interest Convergence –White individuals support racial progress only when it aligns with their own interests.
3. The Social Construction of Race – Race is a social construct rather than a biological reality.
4. Storytelling and Counter-Storytelling – Amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives.
5. The True Beneficiaries of Civil Rights Legislation – White individuals continue to benefit the most from civil rights laws that were originally intended to support marginalized groups.

For Black male student-athletes (BMSAs), these tenets are evident in sports in college, where racial equality is often superficial, failing to address deeper systemic barriers that impact their opportunities and experiences. Additionally, CRT serves as an analytical tool to examine and challenge the structures of white supremacy that oppress people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2013). It calls for exposing racist actions against marginalized groups and understanding how systemic inequities persist (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Johnson & Jackson, 2017).

When analyzing the experiences of BMSAs at Historically White Institutions (HWIs), CRT provides a critical lens to examine how structures such as education, wealth, and race — deeply embedded in white supremacy — shape their experiences. This perspective highlights the

systemic challenges and institutional barriers BMSAs face, influencing how they are perceived, treated, and supported (or not) within both academic and athletic spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer, 2019).

Moreover, CRT explores the counter-narratives of African Americans in higher education and sports (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It challenges dominant theoretical paradigms that frame students and athletes of color through a deficit perspective (Oseguera & Goldstein, 2015). Thus, to fully capture the role of race in these interconnected societal areas — including the experiences of BMSAs in college athletics — this research employs the lens of CRT. By applying CRT as a foundational theoretical (and methodological) framework, this study not only highlights the systemic challenges faced by BMSAs but also underscores the broader implications of racialized experiences in higher education and sports. The following section will discuss the significance of this research, emphasizing its contribution to scholarship, policy, and the lived experiences of BMSAs at HWIs.

Significance

This study is noteworthy for NCAA policymakers and Division II member institutions. The NCAA's professed philosophy in Division II focuses on enhancing the holistic student-athlete experience and preparing student-athletes for post-graduation success (Our Division II Story, n.d.), yet existing research shows that BMSA at HWIs are challenged with navigating complex racialized experiences in regard to race, racism, athletics, and academia (Cooper, 2013; 2019). In addition, Division II member institutions are expected to dedicate themselves to an inclusive culture (Our Division II Story, n.d.). However, existing research suggests that despite these expectations, BMSA's voices and experiences remain largely unrecognized, unsupported, and marginalized in research and institutional decision-making, adversely impacting their sense

of belonging at those respective institutions (Bimper, 2015; Harper, 2009). The NCAA supported this notion in their GOALS Study—a nationally representative NCAA study of the experiences and well-being of current student-athletes — that "social experiences in Division II are impacted by a student-athlete's identity, sense of belonging, team environment, and campus support" (NCAA GOALS Study, n.d., p. 25).

Additionally, scholars who have theorized with CRT have highlighted the racialized experiences of BMSAs, emphasizing the importance of their narratives in challenging racial bias, systemic inequalities, stereotypes, and dominant narratives that misrepresent and marginalize their voices and lived realities. CRT scholars believe that racism is deeply embedded, endemic, and systemic in American society; it's ingrained in the fabric of social institutions like higher education as well as collegiate sports (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer, 2019).

The BMSA's predisposition to racism can be shaped by how majoritarian groups view the world. My study examines majoritarian narratives and counter-narratives through the lens of six Division II BMSAs. Furthermore, it challenges majoritarian ideologies that perpetuate racial stereotypes and systemic inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). BMSAs are perceived through majoritarian lenses as athletically gifted but academically inferior, revealing a myopic view of BMSAs. I will seek to disrupt these misconceptions and offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges they confront (Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2019).

If these narratives of BMSAs remain unheard, institutions risk perpetuating the systemic inequities that have long disadvantaged BMSAs. Guided by CRT, my research amplifies the lived experiences of Division II BMSAs at HWIs, a topic that has received little academic attention. It will also give these athletes a platform to share their voices while offering insights

on how NCAA policymakers, university administrators, student-athlete support staff, and Division II institutions can better support them.

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms provides a clear and concise roadmap of key concepts and terminology used throughout my study, with the aim of eliminating confusion and promoting clarity. The key terms that are used throughout this study include the following:

a) **Majoritarian:** Majoritarian is described as the dominant racial group, typically white people, and the social structures that uphold their interest and norms (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

b) **Narrative:** The stories shared by the participants, existing research, or majoritarian groups.

c) **Black Student-Athlete:** Student-athletes that identify as having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa, except those of Hispanic origin (NCAA Demographics Database, n.d.).

d) **NCAA Division II:** a collection of more than 300 NCAA colleges and universities that offer partial-scholarships that contribute toward student-athletes' academic success, athletics contributions, and campus/community involvement (Our Division II Story, n.d.).

e) **Life-In-The-Balance:** A focus on holistic student-athlete development based on learning, service, passion, sportsmanship, resourcefulness and balance (Our Division II Story, n.d.).

f) **Make-It-Yours:** A slogan used to define the Division II experience. It is made up of several descriptors aimed at defining the uniqueness of Division II (Make it Yours, n.d.).

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the experiences of BMSAs in Division II HWIs. In addition, the study analyzed the resources available that contributed to the development of BMSAs at institutions of higher learning and strategies to achieve equity in a Division II athletics department. This study provided BMSAs an opportunity to voice their experiences and concerns about attending a Division II HWI. In addition, this research provided insight for NCAA policy makers, practitioners, athletic department staff members, and other university stakeholders to be more reflective in their interactions with and decisions affecting BMSA experiences, academic success, and career readiness.

Organization of the Study

The organization of this dissertation follows the following format. In the next chapter, I discuss the relevant literature on BMSA experiences related to race, power, systemic inequities, and also establish a foundation for understanding the broader context of my research through existing literature. For the methodology chapter, I describe a qualitative approach and thematic data analysis methods used to explore and understand the experiences of Division II BMSAs at HWIs. I detail the participant selection process, data collection methods and procedures, and pertinent ethical considerations. In chapter four, I outline the findings of my research by identifying themes that emerged from the data that provided insight into the Division II BMSA experience. Lastly, in chapter five, I conclude and discuss, describing the theoretical and practical implications of why BMSAs need their voices amplified when discussing how best to support BMSAs athletically, academically, and in life beyond the sport.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

While existent research and literature centers on Division I athletics, this dissertation addresses such a gap by exploring how BMSAs navigate academic, athletic, and social environments in Division II. Therefore, this chapter reviews the literature focusing on the experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs. In order to contextualize the significance and purpose of the study, it is essential to explore the historical context of Black student-athletes in higher education, as it provides a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges and cultural factors that continue to shape their experiences at NCAA Division II HWIs.

Historical Context of Black Student-Athletes in Higher Education

Southern colleges and universities systematically excluded Black athletes from participation in intercollegiate sports from the 1890's to the 1940's, essentially establishing a "color line" in college sports (Martin, 2010). Jim Crow Laws—a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation (Shropshire, 1996) — existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968 — and were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education and other opportunities (Gates, 2020). For example, those who challenged Jim Crow laws frequently encountered arrest, fines, imprisonment, violence, and even death (Gates, 2020). Such racial segregation policies, including Jim Crow laws, also permeated college athletics, mirroring the wider racial climate of the South (Martin, 2010). These laws prohibited Black Americans from: living in white neighborhoods; using the same waiting room at bus and train stations; using the same water fountain; using the same restrooms, building entrances, elevators, cemeteries, public pools, hospitals, and jails (Gates, 2020; Hairston, 2024; Shropshire, 1996). Some states even required separate textbooks for Black and white students (Martin, 2010; Shropshire, 1996). The Civil

Rights Movement of the 1960's focused on dismantling racial segregation, challenging systemic discrimination, and securing legal and social equality for Black Americans in America. Part of that effort included ensuring the right to vote for all Black citizens. Through the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow laws were formally removed, but informally some states and communities still embraced the ideology of Jim Crow in their policies and actions. For example, it was not uncommon to see signs posted at town and city limits warning Black Americans that they were not welcome there (Martin, 2010).

Some conferences, like the Southern Conference [the original organization of the present-day Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC)] explicitly banned Black athletes from competition until the mid-1960s (Martin, 2010; Shropshire, 1996). Early instances of interracial competition were rare and met with hostility, often resulting in protests or threats of violence from white players, fans, and administrators (Martin, 2010; Shropshire, 1996). The political and social climate during this time led to the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and athletic conferences such as: (a) the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA), (b) Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) in NCAA Division I, and (c) the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC) in NCAA Division II to counter the systemic inequities Black Americans faced (Martin, 2010). Although the 13th Amendment in the United States Constitution formally abolished slavery in 1865, Black athletes were still denied opportunities to compete at HWIs, despite their talent or merit and were forced to compete at HBCUs, where they received fewer resources, limited access to professional scouts, and less media exposure (Shropshire, 1996; Hairston, 2024). It wasn't until 1948, when President Harry Truman ordered integration in the military; in 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that educational segregation was

unconstitutional, ending the era of "separate-but-equal" education; and in 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which together legally ended the segregation that had been institutionalized by Jim Crow laws (Hairston, 2024; Martin, 2010; Shropshire, 1996).

Integration and Protecting White Interest

The desegregating and/or integrating of Black Americans into HWIs in "The South" or south of the Mason-Dixon Line and the challenges that Black American athletes faced after matriculating at those respective institutions faced a turning point in society after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Black Americans were now able to gain access to HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). However, integration in sports led some in the white community to protect white interests. Martin (2010) said that "fans opposed integrated contests and believed in protecting the special white space of the gridiron" (p. 139). Although Black Americans were being integrated in HEIs and "the South" was being desegregated, the first Black American athletes to enter schools in "the South" had to be "exceptional" — academically, socially, and athletically (Martin, 2010). Black American athletes' interest in sports were steadily increasing during the late 50's to late 60's, but white people feared that Black Americans would overtake their storied sporting programs (Martin, 2010). In fact, representatives at some institutions implemented a "two-at-home, three-on-the- road" rule restricting the number of Black American athletes that could compete at one time.

Essentially, two Black athletes were permitted to compete during home games and a max of three were permitted to compete on the road. This "gentlemen's agreement" was an informal, unwritten understanding among white athletic officials, coaches, and administrators that effectively restricted or excluded Black athletes from participating in certain sports, teams, or

competitions, particularly in the early-to-mid 20th century (Martin, 2010). These agreements were not legally binding but were enforced through shared racial attitudes and institutional practices, maintaining segregation in college sports without explicit rules. Although the focus is on "the South," these agreements and mindsets were prevalent across America. The gentlemen's agreements stopped, like Jim Crow Laws, after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It wasn't until 1966, when Texas Western (now University of Texas at El Paso or UTEP) with an all-Black lineup, competed against a historic University of Kentucky team with an all-white lineup in the NCAA men's basketball championship, that sports – and America as a whole – would see a turning point in the fight against racial discrimination and help pave the way for greater inclusion of Black athletes in college athletics.

Post-1966 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship Game

HWIs that were less resourced financially and did not have successful football and men's basketball programs were quicker to integrate their athletics programs with Black athletes compared to more well-known schools that had successful sports programs like Texas A&M, University of Texas, University of Arkansas, and the University of Kentucky (Martin, 2010). Universities that had Black players on their team were still criticized in some southern communities, including representatives at HWIs in "The South," as immoral (Martin, 2010). Yet, a shift occurred during the early 1970s in which schools across the nation (but especially the South) were ridiculed and questioned for not having Black athletes on their teams (Martin, 2010). Additionally, "The South" (and some parts of the North) went from embracing Jim Crow laws and segregation to disbanding Jim Crow and eliminating segregation laws. This shift in athletic integration during the early 1970s coincided with broader societal changes, particularly in how Black athletes were viewed and represented in the media.

Racial Narratives of Black Male Student-Athletes (BMSAs)

Common narratives surrounding BMSAs are often constructed, reinforced, and distorted across different domains of social life, including through widespread messaging in news outlets, social media, television, and other mass communication platforms (Haslerig et al., 2019; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2005). In fact, BMSAs are frequently depicted through a lens of racial bias, often framed by racist stereotypes and distorted ideologies of Blackness. They are commonly spoken about in common discourse and also portrayed in media as naturally gifted yet unteachable, raw, or lacking intelligence—narratives that are not applied to the white male athletes, who are more often recognized for their discipline, intellect, leadership, and coachability (Brown, 2017; Haslerig et al., 2019; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2019).

The portrayal of BMSAs in sports media often reinforces dominant racialized narratives, shaping public perceptions and institutional practices (Oseguera, 2010). Media representations frequently emphasize athletic prowess over academic achievement, thus perpetuating stereotypes. These portrayals contribute to broader discussions about race, power, and identity, influencing how BMSAs are perceived and how they navigate their academic and athletic journeys within HWIs. Scholars suggest that understanding the role of media in constructing and sustaining these narratives is crucial to critically analyzing the experiences of BMSAs and challenging the systemic inequities they face (Haslerig et al., 2019; Oseguera, 2010).

BMSAs have had to endure a milieu of racial segregation, racism, and negative characterizations that have impacted their academic and athletic experiences (Singer, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2017; Harper, 2019; Higginbotham et al., 2022; Howe, 2023; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). Although BMSAs are treated as valued and respected

representatives of a university community, they are also victims of prejudice from white peers, faculty, and nonathletic minority students (Harper, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2017; Melendez, 2008).

Scholars like Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue that racism exists in sports and higher education and continues to impair the lives of people of color. Conversely, sports create opportunities to elevate one's socioeconomic status (Bimper, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2017; Hextrum, 2021). BMSAs face extenuating challenges that impede their ability to achieve athletic and academic success. Although there is existing research that illuminates their experiences, there is limited research that examines how race, racism, systemic inequities, stereotypes, and power dynamics shape the specific Division II BMSA experience. As such, there is a large population of athletes who are often ignored in research literature. To understand this population further, it is important to understand racial inequities in NCAA sports.

Racism in NCAA Sports

Scholars argue that racism holds a permanence in civilization, deeply embedded in various structures of society, e.g., economic, sports, legal, political, and educational (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016). It is molded through society's cultural processes, protocols, norms, and rituals that influence people's perception (Bell, 1995; Feagin, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Singer et al., 2017). Sage (2000) asserts that understanding the social organization and cultural processes, protocols, norms, and rituals of a society begins with a mental image of its configuration. Developing these images is capturing the essence of power, control, and influence that those who have the resources can have on others creating inequity (Oseguera, 2010). Cooper (2012) asserts that sports represent a small-scale version of society, which influences societal beliefs, amplifying racial bias and inequities. Although BMSAs contribute to generating millions of dollars for the NCAA and their

respective higher education institutions (HEIs), revenue-generating capacity often fails to translate to personal gain (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; Hextrum, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

NCAA Amateurism and Black Male Student-Athlete Racial Inequities

Huma et al. (2020) highlighted the complexities and challenges of addressing the wealth inequities of Black athletes within the NCAA in their article titled, "How the NCAA's Empire Robs Predominantly Black Athletes of Billions in Generational Wealth." They illustrate how the NCAA is guided by the amateurism model, built on the premise that student-athletes should compete for the love of the game, rather than financial compensation, thereby distinguishing college sports from professional sports (Hawkins, 2010). This model reinforces that student-athletes are not employees, but in fact are primarily students. The NCAA argues that amateurism maintains the integrity of college sports by prioritizing education over commercial gain (Overview, n.d.). Huma et al. (2020) assert that the amateurism model of the NCAA creates inequities for BMSAs and inhibits opportunities to obtain generational wealth. Further, they argue that the NCAA has built its business on racial inequality and injustice for decades, in part, by implementing the amateurism model. They argue further that the amateurism model is infused with systemic racism where race-neutral rules and regulations are designed to have control over the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball, the majority of which are played by BMSAs (Huma et al., 2020).

The introduction of NIL rights for student-athletes has significantly shifted the landscape for BMSAs, providing them with new opportunities for financial compensation. While the amateurism model previously restricted their ability to profit from their athletic achievements, NIL now allows them to capitalize on their personal brand and marketability (Name, Image, and

Likeness, n.d.). This shift challenges the traditional NCAA structure that Huma et al. (2020) argue has been built on racial inequality and systemic racism, particularly within revenue-generating sports like football and men's basketball. However, while NIL opens new avenues for wealth creation, it also raises questions about whether this opportunity will equitably benefit all athletes or disproportionately favor those in high-profile sports, potentially perpetuating the same inequities BMSAs have long faced.

Racial Exploitation of Black Male Student-Athletes

BMSAs face significant risks, including exploitation (Singer, 2019). Institutions actively recruit student-athletes to enhance the success of their sports programs and, in some cases, to increase overall enrollment numbers for their respective institutions (Beamon, 2008; Cooper, 2012; Hextrum, 2021; Hodge, 2015; Singer, 2019). Conversely, failing to maintain or boost enrollment through athletics can jeopardize the institution's survival. For instance, NCAA data shows that in some cases, student-athletes make up more than 50 percent, 60 percent, or even 70 percent of the student body at some HEIs (NCAA Demographics Database, n.d.).

Collegiate athletics can generate substantial revenue for HEIs, motivating policy makers to prioritize the recruitment of high-profile athletes who can attract significant media attention and enhance the campus visibility (Singer, 2019). Beamon (2008) examined the exploitation and marginalization of BMSAs within Division I college athletics. The findings from the study revealed BMSAs are often recruited primarily for their athletic talent and ability to generate revenue at their institutions. In addition, while universities profit from their participation in high-revenue sports like football and men's basketball, BMSAs are left with minimal economic security post-college, especially if they do not transition to professional sports. Cooper (2016) explored the intersection of race, exploitation, and athletic experiences of BMSAs. He argued

that BMSA experiences are situated within a broader context of systemic racism at HEIs. Additionally, he asserts that Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) profit from Black athletes in revenue-generating sports but fail to provide the adequate support structure for them to succeed in post-collegiate careers. In addition, Singer (2019) argued that BMSAs face disproportionate physical risks and psychological pressures, while HEIs prioritize financial gain. This pattern of racialized exploitation within collegiate athletics is further intensified by the hyper-commercialization of NCAA sports, where the financial interests of institutions, sponsors, and media conglomerates often take precedence over the wellbeing of BMSAs.

Comparing Resources and Commercialization in Divisions I and II

The NCAA explained that Division I institutions generally manage the largest athletics budgets; have the median undergraduate enrollment of 8,883 students, the largest among the three NCAA Divisions; and offer lucrative athletics scholarships that cover the full cost of attendance (Overview, n.d.). On the other hand, Division II institutions manage a budget that is primarily funded through the institution, just like other departments of the college or university, rather than being financially self-sustaining. It has the second largest median undergraduate enrollment of the three Divisions at 2,169 students and operates off a partial-scholarship model, which helps keep athletics budgets more in line with the institution's bottom line (Overview, n.d.).

Student-athletes in high-revenue sports at Division I institutions receive a wide range of benefits that enhance both their athletic and academic experiences. These advantages include exclusive access to personal academic tutors, structured study sessions, training tables that ensure meals align with rigorous practice and competition schedules, premium athletic gear and

apparel, and heightened visibility on both local and national stages (NCAA Recruiting Facts, n.d.). Prestige and resources associated with the Division I lifestyle make it an appealing avenue, attracting widespread media attention and corporate interest nationwide (Hawkins et al., 2017; Henderson, 2017; Singer, 2019).

Collegiate athletics, especially at the Division I level, have evolved into a multi-million-dollar industry, fueled by lucrative media rights deals, corporate sponsorships, advertising agreements, and donor contributions (Henderson, 2017). With sports deeply embedded in American culture, many scholars and critics argue that universities increasingly prioritize athletics over academics, driven by the escalating commercialization and substantial financial incentives tied to collegiate sports (Bimper, 2012; Bimper et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2017, Lapchick, 2006; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). In Division I, BMSAs are often judged by their athletic prowess more than their academic ability, and are credited with the successes of the revenue-generating programs of football and men's basketball due to their sensational crowd-pleasing performances (Hextrum, 2021; Hodge, 2015).

Given the partial-scholarship model of Division II and the funding model, a budget intertwined with the university, seeking to balance academics with athletics, hyper-commercialization is not as widespread as it is in Division I (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.). Here are some examples of how this plays out: First, Division II has limited national TV contracts, unlike Division I, where major conferences and schools secure lucrative television deals. Second, Division II events are rarely broadcast on major networks. Instead, games may be streamed on smaller platforms like the NCAA's own digital network. Third, Division II has smaller sponsorship deals. Division I programs attract major corporate sponsorships from companies like Nike, Adidas, and Gatorade (Overview, n.d.). In contrast, Division II schools

typically rely on smaller-scale sponsorships or regional partnerships that provide equipment and funding without the same level of corporate influence. Fourth, there is less emphasis on ticket revenue. Many Division I schools generate substantial income from ticket sales, particularly in football and men's basketball (NCAA Recruiting Facts and Figures, n.d.). Division II schools, with smaller venues and local fan bases, rely more on student fees, institutional support, and fundraising rather than high ticket prices and packed stadiums (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.). Fifth, Division II schools have lower athlete compensation pressure. The push for NIL deals is massive in Division I, where athletes can secure large endorsements. In Division II, however, NIL opportunities exist but are usually on a much smaller scale, often limited to local businesses or social media partnerships (Name, Image, and Likeness, n.d.; Our Division II Story, n.d.). Sixth, Division II schools have more institutional control over budgets. Since Division II programs are more financially tied to the university rather than self-sustaining like many Division I athletic departments, there's a stronger emphasis on balancing academic and athletic expenditures rather than prioritizing revenue generation (Our Division II Story, n.d.). Finally, Division II schools have less influence from professional pathways, In Division I, sports like basketball and football are often seen as stepping stones to professional leagues. While Division II athletes can go pro, the level of commercialization surrounding recruitment, media exposure, and agent involvement is significantly lower.

Commercialization and Athlete Expectations

The hyper-commercialized nature of collegiate sports fosters an intense, profit-driven environment where winning is prioritized above all else. This "win-at-all-costs" culture pressures athletes to seek out elite programs with strong track records of success, as these institutions offer the greatest visibility and the best pathways to professional sports opportunities (Childs, 2021;

Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). Although BMSAs make up a significant portion of collegiate football and men's basketball rosters, only a small percentage successfully transition to the professional level in the National Football League (NFL) or National Basketball Association (NBA) (Childs, 2021; Hodge, 2015; Singer, 2019). Per the NCAA "Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics" (n.d.), approximately 1.5 percent of approximately 17,156 draft eligible football players in the NCAA (Divisions I, II, III) are drafted to the NFL. In addition, approximately 1.1 percent of approximately 4,270 draft eligible men's basketball players in the NCAA (Divisions I, II, III) are drafted to the NBA.

Table 1

Student-Athletes That Go Professional

	NCAA Participants	Approximate # Draft Eligible	# Draft Picks	# NCAA Drafted	% NCAA to Major Pro	% NCAA to Total Pro
Men's Basketball	19,213	4,270	58	46	**1.1%**	20.6%
Football	77,204	17,156	259	259	**1.5%**	--

Note: "Estimated probability of competing in professional athletics," by NCAA, 2023. Retrieved 31 March 2025. (https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2015/3/6/estimated-probability-of-competing-in-professional-athletics.aspx).

For the NCAA to achieve its mission of preparing student-athletes to learn, compete, and grow on-and-off the field (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.), it is important to understand the Division II BMSA experience and illuminate successful pathways for academic, athletic, and lifelong success. This study will focus on understanding this effort, because 98 percent of all collegiate football and men's basketball student-athletes will pursue professional opportunities in areas outside of being a professional athlete (NCAA Recruiting Facts and Figures, n.d.). To fully

support the diverse aspirations of Division II BMSAs, particularly in HWIs, it is crucial to explore how these institutions can foster environments that prepare them for success beyond athletics, in both academic and professional realms.

Black Male Student-Athletes' Experiences

The academic and athletic experiences of Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) at HWIs are commonly shaped by a complex interplay of stereotypes, systemic barriers, and institutional expectations. Despite the NCAA's emphasis on holistic success, Black athletes often find themselves navigating a collegiate environment that prioritizes their athletic contributions over their academic development. Melendez (2008) argues that Division I Black athletes, particularly Black football players are often viewed as athletes first and students second. This perception leads to their belief that their presence on campus is for sports rather than for academics or a degree. Additionally, Melendez (2008) found that several Black athletes feel isolated at HWIs and struggle to acclimate to the campus environment. Scholars argue that BMSAs face difficulty balancing the intense demands of football or their respective sport alongside academic responsibilities, with coaches often pressuring them to prioritize sports over their education (Bimper, 2015; Melendez, 2008). Furthermore, BMSAs also expressed that the lack of Black leadership and mentorship exacerbates their feelings of isolation. However, scholars indicate that the systems designed to prepare BMSAs for degree attainment often fail to prepare them for the rigors and expectations of college (Bimper, 2012; Bimper, 2015; Hodge, 2015). Research also shows that Black athletes in Division I sports, particularly those in revenue-generating sports like men's basketball and football, tend to have poorer academic outcomes compared to the general student body (Bimper et al., 2012; Bimper, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2017; Meekins, 2018; Singer, 2019).

Black Male Student-Athletes' Identity Challenges

Black male student-athletes at D-I institutions face a unique set of challenges (Harrison et al., 2017). While they generate millions of dollars for universities and the NCAA, this rarely translates into personal gain at HWIs. Despite the defining social title of "student-athlete," Black athletes face overt issues such as racism, negative stereotypes, exploitation, low graduation rates, academic clustering, and resentment, all of which isolate and marginalize them from the larger university population (Johnson & Jackson, 2017). Further, Martin et al. (2010) argues that stereotypes about student-athletes distort perceptions of their individual performance and undercut their best performance efforts in the classroom.

As students, Black college athletes in Division I seek higher education for opportunities to advance their education and career aspirations (Johnson & Jackson, 2017). However, the academic integrity and values of a Division I HWI are often jeopardized by the "win at all costs" mentality (Childs, 2021; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). Some coaches and athletes often embrace the paradox that the athletic role supersedes academic priorities, effectively making student-athletes "athletes first," rather than "students first" (Harrison et al., 2006; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Harrison et al. (2015) argue that the lack of attention of the student-first mentality negatively impacts both the external perception and self-identity of student-athletes.

Black Male Student-Athletes Navigating Multiple Roles

Erikson (1959) proposed that identity is the organizational process connecting individual behavior to the social world. Brewer et al. (1993) define athletic identity as the "extent to which a person identifies with the role of an athlete" (p. 69). As individuals develop holistically, their

identity is shaped by their surroundings, interactions with influential people, and life experiences (Raikes, 2010). Current research suggests that individuals possess multidimensional identities that govern and guide how they see themselves in relation to different situations (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982).

Student-athletes in particular must manage multiple roles, such as being an athlete, a student, and often, a son or daughter. The roles can be further influenced by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and spiritual beliefs. Depending on the situation, individuals may reference one or more of these identities to determine how they should feel or behave in each situation (Armitage & Conner, 1999; Charng et al., 1988). Although athletic identity can be described as multidimensional, much of the literature on student-athletes focuses on their navigation of only two primary worlds: student and athlete (Adler & Adler, 1991; Person & LeNoir, 1997).

Athletes' identities can evolve depending on the circumstances and their experiences. For example, a non-scholarship student-athlete who earns a full scholarship takes on a new identity. In addition, representatives of athletes' interests include, but are limited to coaches, academic advisors, athletic directors, compliance administrators, relatives, teachers and college professors, also shape student-athletes' identities. Challenges arise when there is an imbalance between the identities of the student-athletes that cause them to prioritize one role over another (Adler & Adler, 1991). For instance, student-athletes must meet certain academic standards and perform at a high level in their sport, unlike their non-athlete peers. Athletes who find it challenging to meet the academic standards while participating in their sport might focus more of their attention and effort on the identity they are weak in.

Structural Barriers and Academic Policies at HWIs

Athletics programs require a lot from student-athletes that keep them on a busy schedule (Gayles, 2009). In addition to meeting athletic requirements, student-athletes must fulfill academic standards to maintain eligibility for competition. Per the National Collegiate Athletics Association Division I manual (2025), a "40-60-80 rule" sets the academic progress benchmarks for athletes. GPA requirements are based on the institution's minimum overall GPA required for graduation. Division I student-athletes must earn at least 90 percent towards the minimum GPA at the beginning of their second year, 95 percent at year three, and 100 percent at year four. The 40-60-80 rule provides an eligibility standard for Division I athletes based on their progress toward earning a degree. This rule stipulates that student-athletes must complete 40 % of their degree coursework by the end of the second year, 60 % by the end of the third year, and 80 % by the end of the fourth year, with each athlete also required to earn a minimum of six credit hours per term.

According to the National Collegiate Athletics Association (2025) Division II manual, academic requirements are similarly strict for Division II athletes. All student-athletes must be in good academic standing and pass a minimum of nine degree-applicable hours each academic term in which they are enrolled full-time (not including summer terms) to be eligible the following term. Additionally, per academic year each student-athletes must earn 18 semester/27 quarter hours during the regular academic year (which does not include summer). Including the summer, student-athletes are tasked with earning 24 semester/36 quarter hours. All student-athletes beginning in the second year of collegiate enrollment must annually earn a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.00 earned by the beginning of each fall term. Lastly, all student-athletes beginning their third year of enrollment (fifth semester/seventh quarter) and thereafter are

required to designate a degree program. The regular academic year consists of the time beginning with the opening of the institutions' fall term and concluding with the institution's spring commencement exercises (NCAA, 2025, Division II manual).

Racialized Exploitation and the "Dumb Jock" Stereotype

The intricacies of balancing an academic schedule with athletic demands can prove to be challenging, especially when combating damaging stereotypes that affect their collegiate experiences (Bimper, 2015; Lehman, 2020; Nite, 2012). Particularly in the case of Black student-athletes, stereotypes like "dumb jocks" with assumptions about their intellectual capabilities and commitment to education have plagued the collegiate community, originating from both students and faculty (Melendez, 2008; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). These stereotypes are especially pervasive for Black males in Division I sports, where they are often seen as intellectually inferior and unteachable compared to their white teammates (Oseguera, 2008). Martin et al. (2010) found that Division I African American male student-athletes from four academically rigorous universities in the Pac-Ten conference identified key challenges in their experiences: the need to prove their worth, perceptions of being a societal threat, the importance of time management, and the critical role of pride and in achieving academic success. Despite these challenges and demands, BMSAs continue to strive for academic success but call for institutions to focus on their holistic experiences beyond athletics. Bimper et al. (2012) argued that the dumb jock stereotype disproportionately affects Black student-athletes, reinforcing perceptions that lead to systemic issues such as academic clustering, where BMSAs are steered toward less rigorous majors that prioritize athletic eligibility over genuine educational development. These racialized stereotypes not only affect BMSAs' academic treatment but also contribute to "racial battle

fatigue" (RBF), a term describing stress by Black athletes due to continuous exposure to racism and microaggression both in and outside the classroom (Smith, 2010).

Racialized stereotypes negatively affect their treatment by peers, faculty, and coaches, often resulting in lower academic expectations for them. And yet, Oseguera (2010) found that BMSAs were resilient and created a road map for academic success at HWIs despite the narratives the labels placed on them, the racial discrimination, and the balancing act between athletic and academic demands. The study showed that BMSAs can find academic success at HWIs if there is social support from family, peers, and mentors from faculty and staff—particularly those who empathize with them, and other Black student-athletes who share similar experiences.

Academic Clustering and Its Implications

Academic clustering is defined as when 25 percent or more of a single athletic team enrolls into a major (Bimper, 2020; Johnson & Jackson, 2017; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Fountain and Finley's (2009) study looked at the academic majors of upperclassmen Division I football players in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and examined whether race influenced academic clustering, specifically comparing the major selections of white and minority football players. These scholars found academic clustering was prevalent among upperclassmen football players, with many players concentrated in just a few majors. In addition, minority football players were significantly more likely than white players to be clustered into a small number of academic majors. At six of the ACC institutions studied, 75 percent or more of minority players were enrolled in just two academic majors. Whether it was by peer pressure, social pressure, or personal choice, student-athletes that end up in the academic clusters face residual consequences like unhappiness and isolation (Johnson & Jackson, 2017).

BMSAs, often admired for the exploits on the gridiron or court, have expressed feelings of discontent when handling the academic rigors of higher education if they are unprepared for it (Harrison et al., 2017; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Racial stereotypes regarding the academic abilities of student-athletes have become too commonplace in society (Melendez, 2008). Harper (2016) stated, "Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of Black male students more insidious than in college athletics" (p. 1). In spite of the misconceptions about Black bodies and their academic aptitude, NCAA governing rules in all Divisions mandate that the institutions ensure each student-athlete is maintaining progress-toward-degree (PTD). This expectation was established to help student-athletes graduate within a six-year timeframe per the NCAA academic requirements for the division. In fear of missing the academic eligibility minimum academic qualifications, some coaches and athletics personnel have pushed BMSAs into "easy" majors to stay eligible (Bimper, 2020; Johnson & Jackson, 2017; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019).

BMSAs face increasing challenges stemming from exploitation, the denial of equitable education, and marginalization that impede their athletic experiences and academic progress (Johnson & Jackson, 2017). This ongoing struggle highlights the critical importance of greater diversity and inclusion within collegiate athletics, as fostering equitable educational opportunities and supportive environments can help mitigate the systemic barriers faced by BMSAs.

Racial Stacking in College Sports

Racial stacking is defined as when Black and other athletes of color are placed in certain positions (e.g., running back, wide receiver, linebacker) based on racial stereotypes (Pitts & Yost, 2013). Pitts and Yost (2013) conducted a study in which they examine the impact that a

player's race has on the probability of him changing positions when he moves from high school to the collegiate ranks. They found that racial staking often occurs in revenue-generating sports like men's basketball and football. In these scenarios, white and Black players are relegated to certain types of positions on a team and are excluded from competing for other positions within the team (Pitts & Yost, 2013). "Even with the increase in participation in college football, Black Americans have consistently been overrepresented or 'stacked' in those positions requiring physical skill, while whites are disproportionately found in 'thinking and leadership' positions" (Pitts & Yost, 2013, p. 210). For example, white student-athletes, disproportionately, take on the positions of quarterback and center in football and point-guard in men's basketball and assert BMSAs are not considered for those types of positions because of racial stereotypes and misperceptions of BMSA's intelligence (Oseguera, 2010; Pitts & Yost, 2013). Conversely, BMSAs are put in reactionary positions such as running back and defensive back in football. These positions require great athleticism and labor, and a majoritarian assumption about BMSAs is they are naturally athletic and will thrive in laborious roles (Oseguera, 2010). Racial stacking and stereotypes contribute to broader narratives that shape student-athletes' identities, reinforcing the delicate balance student-athletes must have between their academic and athletic experiences.

Diversity and Inclusion Efforts in Collegiate Athletics

Despite growing awareness of the challenges faced by BMSAs, many collegiate athletics programs continue to struggle for diversity and inclusion. An underlying mission of Division II, and very similar to Division I, is that colleges and universities are expected to operate their athletics programs with integrity and in a welcoming manner that complies with conference and NCAA rules and regulations (Inclusion, n.d.). The NCAA strongly believes in and is committed

to diversity and inclusion among its member institutions including, but not limited to student-athletes, coaches, and athletic department administrators. Further, the NCAA expects diversity and inclusion to improve the learning environment on member campuses and enhance excellence within the NCAA (Inclusion, n.d.). Division II universities are tasked with ensuring that student-athletes of color experience life on campus as productive and in a manner that enhances their learning experiences (Inclusion, n.d.).

Although the NCAA's vision emphasizes diversity and inclusion as a way to improve the learning environment for all student-athletes, BMSAs have encountered many challenges that impede their learning experiences while at HWIs. Bimper et al. (2012) conducted a study that examined the experiences of successful BMSAs in college sports, challenging majoritarian narratives, such as the dumb jock racial stereotypes at HWIs to create counter-narratives that helped to dispel the negative dominant perspectives of BMSAs. They found that BMSAs have to find a balance between their athletic and academic identities. They can achieve this through visualizing who they want to become beyond just an athlete. In addition, the authors stress the importance of mentorship from Black faculty, coaches, and former student-athletes as well as family support and having positive role models as critical for BMSAs to achieve academic success at HWIs.

In addition, Bimper et al. (2012) recommend HWIs should invest in the holistic development of BMSAs to help them succeed. Despite these recommendations for holistic development, systemic barriers persisted, including the practice of racial stacking, where BMSAs are funneled into specific positions or roles within their sports based on racial stereotypes. This phenomenon not only limits their athletic opportunities but also reinforces broader societal perceptions that prioritize their physical abilities over their intellectual and leadership potential.

Combating Power Structures

Scholars argued BMSAs and Black students must combat power structures steeped in white supremacy that serve to perpetuate the myth of athlete-student ideologies (Oseguera, 2010; Hextrum, 2021). Black athletes serve as a primary stakeholder group that represents a majority of participants in high profile, revenue producing Division I sports of American football and men's basketball (Agyemang et al., 2010). According to the NCAA Demographics Database (2024), Black athletes make up roughly 46 percent of the population for Division I football, roughly 60 percent of the population for Division I men's basketball, and roughly 47 percent of the population for women's basketball. These numbers focused on HWIs and omitted HBCUs. The omission is to highlight the experiences at HWIs. Only a few decades ago, these individuals were not allowed to participate in these sports at some HWIs. This realization prominently puts on display the hegemonic structure of sports and higher education, particularly those within the NCAA, Divisions I and II.

Highly profitable and mesmerizing, sports touch every part of American culture. "Oftentimes, sports reinforce the dominant power structure and social inequalities present within a society" (Cooper, 2012, p. 261). For example, Black athletes represent a majority percentage of the high-revenue sports (football, men's and women's basketball) but are underrepresented in those sports as head coaches. Another example can be found in the demographic of America. Sage (2000) argues that "a great deal of the wealth among the wealthiest individuals in the United States is inherited (e.g., Rockefellers, Kennedys, Bushes) …and most politicians in America are White, male, and affluent" (p. 26).

Capitalistic Society and Hegemony

Sports are built within a capitalistic society. Meaning, dominant groups (the elite) or key stakeholders within a society will use their power and influence to promote, shape attitudes, values, beliefs, and worldviews in ways that ultimately secure a willing consent of the mass of citizens (Sage, 2000). But it is through this hegemonic image that we can understand reasoning for the power dynamics in America. There is an underlying assumption that capitalist societies are first and foremost class societies that are made up of a hierarchical power structure – the haves and the have nots. Power is obtained through acts of coercion (force) and consent (Sage, 2000).

Often, Black athletes are coerced to believe that the circumstances that they experienced are status quo, tools for the wealthy, and where culture and social relations are produced and changed (Coakley, 2007). Although the Black student-athlete, particularly the Black male student-athlete, occupies one of the most unique positions in society, having generated millions of dollars for universities and the NCAA, yet, for a few elite athletes, revenue-generating capacity often fails to translate to personal gain (Harrison et al., 2017).

Ideological Domination and the Black Athlete

Sage (2000) emphasized that "powerful groups use their control over the resources of government, the legal system, the police, the military, and other services to establish their view of the society as legitimate, all-inclusive, and universal" (p. 22). This statement challenges the notion that fate is designed by a higher order. In the case of Black athletes' aspirations of advancing in a society, this is at the will of the power holders–majoritarian groups.

Tactics such as ideological domination and shaping "popular beliefs" in which social consciousness itself is formed contribute to the mindsets of Black athletes and their feeling of

freedom. Black athletes are situated to question the exploitative nature of sports if they are not in control of their own destiny. But, in a neoliberalism mindset, ideology just doesn't happen (Coakley, 2011). Hegemonic ideologies that are formed are intentional and are socially reproduced throughout society through social institutions like the political and economic systems, the family, schools, music, and sport (Sage, 2000). Every part of the society that influences culture serves as an agent or medium to reinforce power-dominant values. Although not overt, consent is given by less than assuming societal members that the ideals of the dominant group represent that of their own – "the general public is persuaded to consider society and its norms and values as natural, good thus concealing the inherent system of domination" (Sage, 2000, p. 24). Black athletes who are fortunate to escape this daunting matrix seek change and reform for a system that aims to maintain hegemonic structures that oppress minoritized groups.

Calls for Reform

Singer et al. (2017) argue that the United States of America has been at the center of the reproduction of white wealth, power, and privilege over several centuries, and how this oppression of Blacks has persisted since the 1600s. Feagin (2006) and other scholars (Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2005) have argued the existence of systemic racism and its trickle-down effect on organizational culture, structure, and practices. Thus, racism is deeply embedded in the social structures, networks, and policies going back to the era of enslavement in American society (Singer et al., 2017). "Blacks are the only racial group in America that has been subjected to an extended period of slavery and had segregation laws passed against them that were fully sanctioned and supported by the Supreme Court" (Singer et al., 2017, p. 23).

Singer et al. (2017) assert that a strong anti-Black narrative, racial images, racial emotions, and racial ideologies established over time and used to rationalize and justify white power and privilege and racial minority oppression and subordination diffuses power of Black athletes, even the elite. A system that seemingly is functional and efficient (Coakley, 2007) and one that allows a few selected individuals a "seat at the top" [a place among the elite] among the other wealthy members of the dominant group needs to be challenged and reformed. In some cases, Black athletes have already taken initiatives to make their voices heard.

Reform in Action

Athletics serve as a front porch to a university, often being the most visible and recognizable department. Artifacts such as team mascots, logos, and facilities foster pride and connection within the campus community, sometimes evoking nostalgia (Singer, 2019). While athletics exist within a hegemonic power structure, Black athletes, particularly BMSAs, have the potential to disrupt these dynamics through collective action and unity. For example, in November 2015, University of Missouri Black football players were willing to strike [not compete in a scheduled televised football game] in support of Black students' protest of the campus racial climate and the administration's neglect in appropriately addressing the issues resulting from their conditions. It was estimated that the University of Missouri was slated to lose roughly one million dollars in the event the strike came to fruition (Hawkins, 2017).

Activism can be sparked by structural inequities, such as the lack of resources for athletes' basic needs – like food. For instance, Shabazz Napier, a Black NCAA Division I men's basketball scholarship athlete, made a statement after helping his team (University of Connecticut) win their second NCAA National Championship in 2015; he commented on his experience of going to bed hungry and not having enough money to get food on national

television. After his comments, the NCAA instituted a policy allowing universities to provide unlimited meals to college athletes (Hawkins, 2017). These examples underscore the importance of critically examining the frameworks shaping the experiences of BMSAs and call for a deeper exploration of race, power, systemic oppression, and sport in higher education.

The Underlying Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) builds upon the work of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement, which highlighted the ways in which legal structures in society perpetuate oppression (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Critical race theorist in education, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2016), notes that CLS scholars critiqued these hegemonic structures and sought ways to dismantle them. In my study, I utilize CRT to challenge the hegemonic systems that oppress people of color in American society, particularly Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) in Division II college athletics. CRT is based on five foundational tenets:

1. Racism is normal, not abnormal: Racism is ingrained in American society and operates as a standard, not an anomaly. It is embedded in the systems and structures of society.
2. Interest Convergence: Racism in America advances the interests of white people, both elite and working-class, through a concept known as "interest convergence." This asserts that Black people will achieve civil rights only when it aligns with white interests.
3. Whiteness as Property: Whiteness is seen as a form of property that deems those who are "white" to be superior to all other racial groups and believes white people are owed inalienable privileges, opportunities, and advantages that are denied to people of color.
4. Critique of Liberalism: This tenet claims laws that are designed to address racial inequality are undermined before they are ever implemented.

5. Counter-Storytelling: This tenet asserts that people of color should name their own reality. That is, tell their truth as they see it or live it. Counter-storytelling allows the voices of oppressed groups to communicate their experiences. Dominant groups use stock explanations and stories that convince people into thinking that their stories justify their privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Singer et al., 2017).

In this study, I employed counter-storytelling to amplify the voices of BMSAs and challenge the majoritarian narratives that often marginalize their experiences. This approach enabled me to reveal the systemic inequities in both athletics and higher education that disproportionately affects BMSAs. Through CRT, I sought to unearth the ways racism operates within Division II college athletics and how these systems influence the experiences of BMSAs.

CRT seeks to create a united voice for reform and change in systems and structures that oppress people of color. Thus, to capture to what degree race has impacted Division II college athletics, particularly the experiences of BMSAs, I framed this study through the theoretical lens of CRT. This theory allows me to focus on the multifaceted ways racism impacts the BMSA experience in higher education. In addition, CRT provides a critical framework for understanding the various ways that hegemonic structures, racism, and race intersect to disenfranchise individuals in society (Creswell, 2014). Scholars such as Bimper (2015), Harper (2016), and Singer (2015) have effectively utilized CRT to challenge existing assumptions about race and power, and their work provides a foundation for my own inquiry into the lived experiences of BMSAs in collegiate athletics.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on literature that contextualizes the experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs. Most of the studies that illuminate Black athlete experiences are

situated on NCAA Division I BMSAs at HWIs, contributing to a gap that exists in the research exploring BMSAs experiences within Division II HWIs. Guided by CRT, this study explores the experiences of BMSAs and offers context for discussion for the general development of BMSAs across higher education and HWIs. Grounded in a strong theoretical framework, this research study is both timely and essential in broadening discussions on equity, inclusion, and systemic inequities within college athletics. In addition, these findings will provide a foundation for more informed policies and practices that better support the holistic development of BMSAs in higher education.

Building on the foundational literature and theoretical framework that contextualizes the experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs, the next chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore these experiences in depth. Chapter 3 details the research design, data collection methods, and analytical strategies employed to investigate the research question.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study further illuminates how Black student-athletes within higher education institutions face a myriad of obstacles based on profound systemic challenges (Bell, 1995; Bimper 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2017; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Singer, 2019), and the ways their multiple roles as athlete and student are often situated through racialized and gendered stereotypes. Specifically, this study explores the lived experiences of Division II Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) enrolled at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM), this study illuminates BMSA voices and their stories, recognizing the ways in which race and racism are embedded in social structures like higher education and athletics, adversely impacting these students' experiences in ways often overlooked by dominant, majoritarian discourse (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT and CRM assert that race and racism are not merely individual biases, but systemic issues that permeate institutions. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) emphasize how the ideology of racism perpetuates mischaracterizations of people of color, and this lens is applied to understanding of collegiate athletes. They argue that racism is a systemic issue that is embedded in social systems, including education, and that majoritarian narratives often depict students of color as academically deficient. In this context, counter-storytelling serves as a method to challenge these dominant, majoritarian assumptions, and this study uses that approach to provide a space for BMSAs' voices to be heard. Many scholars have noted that unconscious bias, white supremacy, privilege, and racial stereotypes sustain the permanence of racism in American society and reinforce narratives that perpetuate oppression among people of color (Feagin, 2006). By illuminating the unique challenges and successes of Division II BMSAs, this study sought to

understand how race and power dynamics operate in spaces traditionally dominated by majoritarian groups.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Black male student-athletes at a Division II Historically White Institutions navigate their academic and athletic experiences?
2. What challenges and opportunities shape the college experiences of Black male student-athletes at Division II Historically White Institutions?

This qualitative study utilizes a critical race methodology to examine BMSA experiences and challenge dominant, majoritarian narratives that reflect and reinforce the perspectives, values, and interests of the dominant racial group. The following sections outline this study's epistemological stance, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods in alignment with the CRT framework.

Epistemological Stance: Critical Constructivism

Epistemology refers to "the nature of knowledge acquisition" and seeks to understand how we make sense of a social world (Jones et al., 2014, p. 14). Critical race theorists and scholars argue that race is a social construct used to justify inequality, and is inextricably embedded into social structures, institutions and education (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016). In this study, I engage with participants to construct a shared understanding of their lived experiences. To best capture the essence of these complex human interactions, I align with the critical constructivist epistemological stance, which emphasizes how BMSAs' knowledge, identity, and experiences are shaped by race, sports culture, education, and power structures.

Critical constructivism encourages critical thinking and argues that cultural, social, economic, and political contexts construct our perspectives on the world, self, and others (Kincheloe, 2005). It seeks to expose hidden power structures and empowers people to think critically about their realities (Kincheloe, 2005). CRT, as a foundational element of CRM, challenges majoritarian narratives by highlighting the counter-narratives of BMSAs, affirming their experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Through a qualitative approach, this study aims to disrupt the hegemonic discourse that portrays HWIs as race-neutral spaces, illuminating instead the systemic barriers that these athletes navigate daily (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Ontologically, critical constructivism seeks to examine the nature of reality and existence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It explores fundamental questions about being, such as how things are classified, how they exist, and the extent to which individuals exercise free will versus those choices shaped by external choices. For BMSAs, reality is socially constructed and multilayered, influenced by intersecting factors such as race, socioeconomics, and sports, as well as multiple identities – including athlete, student, Black man, and in some cases, father (Singer, 2019). In a majoritarian societal ontology, BMSAs are often reduced to their athletic ability or prowess and not their academic aptitude and potential. This narrow framing limits their agency beyond sports and raises ethical questions about the values that shape their experiences (Beamon, 2014).

Scholars have argued that the NCAA and its member institutions prioritize commercialization and financial gain over the academic and holistic development of athletes (Hawkins, 2010; Rhoden, 2010; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). In addition, racial stereotyping and objectification, lack of support post-graduation, and the prioritization of sports over education are examples of ethical concerns that student-athletes, particularly Black male athletes, encounter

(Donnor, 2005; Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2008). Ontology and axiology deepen the critical constructivist approach by examining how BMSAs perceive their realities and the values that shape their educational and athletic experiences (Harrison & Martin, 2012).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as a powerful and critical analytical tool for examining how racism is structurally embedded within legal systems, policies, media, and institutions of higher education (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2005). Rather than viewing racism as isolated acts of individual prejudice, CRT exposes how it is systematically maintained through social structures that uphold white dominance – the majority. Several scholars have applied CRT to challenge majoritarian narratives that marginalize communities of color, offering a necessary counter-narrative to dominant ideologies that reinforce racial hierarchies (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT is particularly useful in unpacking the racial stereotypes, cultural biases, systemic exploitation, and institutional barriers that shape BMSAs' experience in collegiate athletics. It reveals how BMSAs are often positioned within a system that commodifies their athletic ability while disregarding or neglecting their academic and personal development. By applying CRT to the experiences of BMSAs, this study critically examines how institutional structures and dominant narratives shape their academic and athletic trajectories, revealing the systemic inequities that persist in college.

Five core tenets of CRT support this framework (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017):

1. **Systemic Racism.** CRT argues that racism is a permanent and pervasive feature of society, embedded in institutions such as the legal system, education, and public policy.

For BMSAs, this means that racism is not an isolated incident, but a structural force that influences their daily experiences, including how they are perceived and treated within collegiate athletics and higher education.

2. **Interest Convergence**. This tenet suggests that racial progress occurs only when it aligns with the interests of white individuals and institutions. In the context of BMSAs, universities and athletic departments may advocate for their success, but often because their athletic performance can generate revenue, attention, and prestige. This dynamic can also result in exploitation of BMSAs, where their athletics abilities are prioritized over their academic and personal development.
3. **Social Construction of Race**. Race is not a biological reality but is rather socially constructed and reinforced by society to maintain racial hierarchies. For BMSAs, this is evident in the ways they are often stereotyped or pigeonholed based on racialized assumptions – often perceived primarily as athletes rather than scholars. These narratives shape their opportunities and limit their perceived potential beyond sports.
4. **Storytelling and Counter-Storytelling**. Dominant narratives often mischaracterize the experiences of BMSAs, reinforcing one-dimensional portrayals of them as physically gifted but academically inferior. This tenet highlights the importance of counter-storytelling, which amplifies the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. For BMSAs, counter-storytelling, or counter-narratives, serve as a means to challenge racial stereotypes and reshape public perceptions of their identities often reproduced in society and mainstream media beyond athletics.
5. **Whiteness as Property.** This tenet argues that whiteness is embedded within legal and social structures, functioning as a form of property that grants unearned advantages to

white individuals. In sports, racial equality is presented as superficial, failing to address the deeper systemic inequities that disadvantage BMSAs. While diversity in athletics may be celebrated, the underlying power structures continue to privilege white players, coaches, administrators, and decision-makers, limiting opportunities for BMSAs even beyond their athletic roles.

CRT reveals how layers of subordination in American society based on sociocultural factors shape and impact the lived experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study uses CRT to dismantle dominant narratives that marginalize BMSAs and highlight the systemic structures that perpetuate inequality within higher education and collegiate athletics.

Challenging Majoritarian Narratives: Using CRM to Examine BMSA Experiences

Having established CRT as the guiding theoretical framework, it is essential to examine how majoritarian narratives shape the experiences of BMSAs. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduced narrative analysis and counter-storytelling as key tools for exposing and challenging racial inequities in education, law, and society. They emphasized the importance of stories and storytelling in either reinforcing or dismantling dominant ideologies: "Whether told by people of color or Whites, majoritarian stories are not often questioned because people do not see them as stories but as 'natural' parts of everyday life" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Majoritarian stories uphold dominant perspectives by reinforcing stereotypes and misrepresenting the full complexity of underrepresented groups' experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the case of BMSAs, these narratives often depict physical abilities rather than intelligence or hard work. Another common majoritarian story suggests that BMSAs are admitted to universities or colleges

only because of their athletic scholarships and not their academic merit. Similarly, the pervasive dumb jock stereotype portrays BMSAs as uninterested in education and academically inferior. Additionally, BMSAs are often assumed to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with sports framed as their only viable path to upward mobility.

These stereotypes are reinforced by mainstream media, institutional policies, and public discourse shaping how BMSAs are perceived and treated in collegiate sports and higher education (Bimper, 2015; Bimper, 2020; Harper, 2016; Harris et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2017; Oseguera, 2010; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). The persistent and excessive reproduction of these narratives creates dominant group think or majoritarian stories. These majoritarian stories are often categorized as a certain race, ethnic group, social class, and gender and emphasize a belief that the majoritarian ideology or those within the majoritarian group should have the right to make decisions that affect society.

Majoritarian stories function by distorting and silencing the lived experiences of people of color. That is, these stories claim to be neutral and objective, yet they are deeply rooted in implicit assumptions and deficit thinking, which reinforce negative stereotypes, obscure systemic inequalities, and marginalize the realities of BMSAs (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Majoritarian stories downplay systemic and structural barriers like exploitation, racial discrimination, and limited post-sports career opportunities. These stories often whitewash the challenges communities of color face by reinforcing cultural myths that disenfranchise, oppress, or marginalize these groups. Critical race methodology (CRM) provides a necessary tool and avenue for dismantling these narratives, amplifying the voices of BMSAs, and exposing the structural forces that shape their realities (Feagin, 2020).

Centering Black Male Student-Athlete Voices through Counter-Narratives

CRM, rooted in CRT, recognizes that racism is embedded in societal structures and seeks to challenge dominant ideologies that reinforce racial power hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Given the systemic nature of racial bias in higher education, CRM provides an essential tool to explore BMSA experiences. Unlike traditional research approaches that rely on external observations, CRM prioritizes the stories and voices of marginalized communities as valid and essential to understanding their realities and addresses the direct discussion of race in college athletics creating counter-stories to majoritarian stories.

Given the theoretical underpinnings of this qualitative study, CRM was an aligned starting point for developing the methodology and using counter-narratives for disrupting deficit thinking and majoritarian stories centered around BMSA experiences. Through CRM, Black athletes can challenge hegemonic structures that impede communities of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) utilized CRM to counter deficit storytelling of people of color in education. Their study highlighted that majoritarian narratives often portray students of color through a deficit lens, focusing on failure rather than resilience. In addition, their study argued that students of color possess innate abilities (e.g., knowledge, skills, resilience) described as community cultural wealth that is often overlooked in majoritarian educational discourse. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that people of color, their voice and experiences, should be prioritized and serve as a means of empowerment for educational justice. Harper (2017) and Singer (2019) further argue that counternarratives play a crucial role in dismantling racial stereotypes and public perception. In addition, BMSA counter-narratives help to dispel preconceived notions of race and class. This study applies a similar methodological approach to BMSAs, foregrounding their lived experiences and strengths rather

than viewing them through a deficit lens. By elevating BMSA perspectives, this study seeks to challenge preconceived notions about race, class, and academic ability, offering a more accurate and humanizing representation of their experiences, on their own terms.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to situate my positionality since I am the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Bimper et al., 2013; Creswell, 2014). I am a Black male, and former Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) student-athlete of a public HWI from the early to mid-2000s. I obtained my bachelor's degree and master's degree where I played. Furthermore, I have always been a big proponent of maximizing student-athlete experiences on campus and have firsthand experience living life as a Black male student-athlete (BMSA) while trying to balance the demands of academic and athletic expectations and combating the stereotypes, labels, and other factors that adversely influenced my experiences. In addition, I have extensive experience working with athletes from various areas of the world. For example, I have worked at a Division I (FBS) public HWI in the athletics department, managing aspects of compliance and student-athlete services, as well as with the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) working with athlete services. Also, I worked for an NCAA Division II public HWI in the southwest region of the United States with direct oversight over athletic compliance, student-athlete services and affairs programming, the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), and Title IX for the athletic department. In my nearly decade of working there, I witnessed evolving and consistent challenges that impeded the student-athlete experience. I also have experience working as a Director of Athletics, managing a public four-year NAIA Minority Serving Institution (MSI).

Intersections of race, sport, and power have impacted my life. Football and basketball were my favorite sports, and I thought that I could become a professional athlete in one of them. I grew up in a military family, and academics were always emphasized. I remember working hard to earn A's and Bs in school and being rewarded by my parents for making an honor roll. I was inspired by legendary athletes like Barry Sanders, the 1988 Heisman Award Winner for Oklahoma State University and NFL Hall of Fame Running Back from the Detroit Lions, and Michael Jordan, six-time champion and NBA Hall of Famer for the Chicago Bulls. I believed that if I worked hard enough, I could become a professional athlete; I wanted to be like "Mike." This is in reference to a Michael Jordan Gatorade commercial that suggested that you could be like Michael Jordan if you drink Gatorade. At a young age, I saw sports as an opportunity to enhance my and my family's socioeconomic status; I wanted to "make it" and achieve financial security. The successes that I experienced playing sports at a young age and in high school afforded me a full scholarship to play football at the collegiate level. My competitiveness in the classroom led to me receiving several accolades for my academic efforts. For example, academically, I was first-team All-Conference for multiple years. In addition, I received second-team academic All-American, was a three-time Arthur Ashe Scholar Athlete, and was on the Dean's and President's Honor roll for the campus.

Although I valued education and was celebrated for my academic success, several people that I encountered along the way were shocked that I took my education seriously or that I cared about my grade point average. Despite my success, I was stereotyped by some in the public as a dumb jock. Scholars have shown me that my story and experiences are like other stories of Black athletes (Bimper et al., 2012; Bimper, 2015; Harper, 2016; Hawkins, 2017; Hodge, 2015; Melendez, 2008; Oseguera, 2010; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). However, very

few scholars explored this phenomenon in Division II. I wanted to explore a gap in research that illuminated the Black athlete experience at Division II and understand how BMSAs at Division II HWIs interpret and navigate their college experiences. For these reasons, CRM guides this work, illuminating the stories of Division II BMSAs and providing counter stories to majoritarian assumptions made by the dominant culture.

Research Design

Data Collection Methods: Recruitment Procedures and Sampling Methods

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the appropriate institutions, I initiated the participant recruitment process. Purposeful sampling was employed as the primary strategy to ensure selection of participants who could provide meaningful insights for the study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, allows researchers to deliberately select individuals who meet specific eligibility criteria relevant to the research question. used in research to select individuals that meet specific criteria relevant to the research questions. To be included in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: Identify as (a) Black/African American, (b) male, (c) be a current football or men's basketball player, (d) attend a HWI, and (e) hold a Junior, Senior, or Graduate classification. Given the study's focus on BMSAs, all participants had to have lineage in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (NCAA Demographics Database, 2024). In addition to purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was utilized to expand recruitment efforts: a non-probability method where existing participants refer to other potential participants who meet the study's criteria that make it helpful in reaching those who may be difficult to access in other ways.

To identify eligible participants, I recruited participants through events such as the Black Student-Athlete Summit (BSAS) –a national gathering dedicated to the holistic development of

Black student-athletes. The BSAS empowers attendees to maximize their college experience and provides a unique space for networking, mentorship, and professional development. With hundreds of individuals attending annually, the BSAS served as an ideal setting for identifying participants who met the criteria for my study. The mission of the BSAS closely aligned with the purpose of my research, further reinforcing its suitability as a recruitment site; hundreds of individuals attend the BSAS on an annual basis, which allowed me to connect with numerous individuals who met the study's criteria.

Beyond in-person recruitment at the BSAS, I expanded outreach through social media platforms and direct outreach. To facilitate accessibility and encourage participation within the recruitment process, I designed promotional materials, including flyers featuring a QR code, which allowed individuals to voluntarily sign up for the study at their convenience (see Appendix A). This approach provided flexibility, allowing potential participants to engage with the study at their convenience, thus increasing the likelihood of participation.

The QR code linked prospective participants to a Qualtrics survey that I created. Qualtrics surveys are commonly used in research to support participant recruitment, data collection, and ethical engagement. I used the platform to screen participants based on eligibility criteria and to collect demographic or preliminary information that can inform interview protocols. I also used this platform to ensure participants were fully aware of the study and ethical considerations before contributing data. Additionally, the platform provided a secure and accessible way to collect anonymous or confidential data from participants across different devices, making it a practical and inclusive tool for gathering research insights. While 34 individuals responded to the Qualtrics survey, only six ultimately agreed to participate and completed the survey in its entirety. In hindsight, requiring responses to demographic questions

would have improved data completeness, as 13 of the 34 respondents only partially completed this section. However, my study focused on the richness of the participants' experiences and not necessarily the number of participants.

Demographics of the Participants

Although my original goal was to recruit 15 Black male student-athletes from NCAA Division II HWIs, six ultimately participated in the study. While this may appear to be a small sample, qualitative researchers consistently emphasize that the strength of a study lies not in the number of participants, but in the depth and richness of their narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002; Smith et al., 2021; Tracy, 2010; Yin, 2016). In research guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Counter-Storytelling or critical race methodology (CRM), the focus is not on reaching a predetermined number of interviews, but rather on honoring the authenticity and complexity of each participant's lived experience (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Rather than seeking repetition or redundancy, I aimed to capture a wide spectrum of racialized experiences, listening closely to how each participant recognized, navigated, and resisted racism and systemic inequities. I continued data collection until no new themes emerged. This depth-over-quantity approach allowed for fewer but more meaningful and probing conversations, ultimately leading to thematic saturation.

To ensure the validity of this study, I implemented multiple validation strategies grounded in CRT and CRM principles. I organized an audit trail of coding decisions and analytical steps, facilitated through Dedoose, a collaborative qualitative data analysis tool. I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the research process, critically reflecting on my positionality and potential biases. Lastly, I used thick description, incorporating rich

demographic context and direct participant quotes to validate the data and to allow readers to evaluate how findings may apply across different settings.

To further contextualize each participant's narrative, Table 2 presents an overview of their name, age, academic classification, sport, and institution. These demographic details serve as an important backdrop for understanding the nuances of their stories and shed light on why their perspectives and identities may align or differ as Division II BMSAs. Together, this information helps ground their counter-narratives in lived realities, offering a fuller, more complex view of their experiences.

Table 2

Participants

Name	Age	Admissions Classification	Sport	Higher Education Institution
1 Jake	24	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Texas
2 John	21	Senior	Men's Basketball	University in the western region of Texas
3 Lewis	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Arkansas
4 Liam	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Texas
5 Marquis	23	Senior	Men's Basketball	University in the western region of Texas
6 Thomas	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Arkansas

Name: Each participant provided me with a pseudonym prior to participating in their interview and is listed here.

Age: I wanted to focus on breadth and depth of knowledge. Utilizing the sampling methods I've employed, I recruited participants who not only met the criterion for the study but also were experts or extremely knowledgeable regarding my research topic. Although freshmen, sophomores, and juniors engage in collegiate sports, seniors and graduate students were selected to provide insight into the depth and breadth of their experiences, shaped by multiple years of attending a college or university. In addition, more seasoned student-athletes may have more

experience with institutional systems (e.g., interactions with coaches, professors, administrators) impacting their perspectives and world view.

Admission Classification: I utilized this demographic to highlight the participant's academic journey. Each participant has transitioned from freshman to senior or are graduate students. During their tenure at their university, these participants had to navigate new academic and social landscapes along the way, offering valuable insights into their lived experiences, including the support or lack thereof that they received from the University. In addition, the NCAA alludes to varying levels of expectations for participants based on their academic progress (NCAA, 2025, Division II manual).

Sports-Specific Considerations: I selected the sports of football and men's basketball for this study, because studies show that the experiences of BMSAs are deeply influenced by the sport they play (Bimper, 2015; Singer, 2019). Football and men's basketball command significant media attention, generate billions of dollars for universities, and are viewed as pathways to becoming a professional athlete (Singer, 2019). Athletes in these sports feel pressure to perform and to carry the weight of the university on their backs (Singer, 2019). Understanding how sport, visibility, and institutional expectations intersect will provide valuable insight into the participants' experiences.

Higher Education Institution (HEI) Consideration: The institutional environment and culture of and the level to which student-athletes are supported can vary from institution to institution. Some of the HEIs attended by the participants are located in Texas while others are located in Arkansas. The location and environment of the institution, town, city, or state can impact BMSAs in diverse ways particularly where BMSAs may experience systemic barriers (Cooper, 2018; Sellers & Neighbors, 2008).

Participant Interviews

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, actively collecting data through document analysis or interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Between July 2023 and February 2024, I conducted field research to deeply engage with the lived experiences of BMSAs at HWIs. During this period, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six current BMSAs who participate in Division II basketball or football. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide both consistency and flexibility with all participants to explore emergent themes in greater depth. I organized my interview protocol based on an open-ended question: What does it mean to you to be a Division II student-athlete? This approach encouraged discourse with the participants and allowed them to reflect on their response. I wanted the participants to feel comfortable. Since I am focused on BMSA experiences at a NCAA Division II HWI, I wanted the first question to bring that focus to the forefront. I also asked the participants, "What stories do you want the world to know about you (as a BMSA)?" It was important to me that the participants shared their experiences to provide counter-narratives against dominant stereotypes. See Appendix B to view my interview protocol.

Each interview lasted no more than 60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom, allowing for rich detailed responses. Additionally, the use of virtual interviews facilitated data collection from participants in geographically diverse locations. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via Otter, a voice meeting notes and real-time transcription app that uses artificial intelligence to write meeting notes automatically with real-time transcription. Otter was selected because it provided a more accurate transcription compared to doing it manually. I was able to provide real-time notes that I annotated, affording me more accuracy in the transcription process.

Interviews were then transcribed and uploaded into Dedoose, an analytic qualitative research tool designed to store, organize, manage, and reconfigure data to enable human analytic reflection (Saldaña, 2021). I utilized this tool to make notes, code electronically, and develop emerging themes for later data analysis. In addition, I was able to shift between multiple analytic tasks such as coding, analytic memo writing, and exploring patterns in the data.

The coding process began after I thoroughly familiarized myself with the data by listening to each interview recording multiple times and carefully reviewing the interview transcripts for accuracy. I then imported the transcripts into Dedoose, where I conducted line-by-line coding by highlighting meaningful excerpts and assigning initial codes based on emerging patterns. These early codes were developed by identifying keywords, recurring phrases, and responses that directly addressed the research question. As the analysis progressed, I refined these codes by grouping related concepts and organizing them into broader thematic categories. Dedoose's visual tools, such as color-coded highlights, helped me track recurring ideas across participants and maintain consistency throughout the coding process. In addition, I used Dedoose's analytic features—specifically the code co-occurrence tool, which generates a matrix or heatmap showing how often two codes appear within the same or overlapping excerpts. This visualization allowed me to identify redundancies, explore relationships between codes, and deepen my understanding of the data. Together, these strategies supported an iterative analysis that led to the identification of key themes and the construction of counterstories grounded in the lived experiences of participants.

All participants expressed interest in the research topic and valued the attention in this area of research. Given my positionality as a Black male, former student-athlete, and former Division II athletics administrator, I prioritized building trust and rapport with participants. I

employed reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging how my background and experiences might shape data collection and interpretation. My shared identity with the participants fostered an environment in which they felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly and authentically. In addition, to further enhance the rigor of the study, I maintained reflective notes to document my observations and potential biases. These additional data sources helped to triangulate findings and strengthen the credibility of the study.

Data Analysis

In this study, I explored and sought to understand the lived experiences of BMSAs at HWIs by implementing CRM's utility and commitment to the voices of marginalized communities and also using personal narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge that disrupt majoritarian stories rooted in white supremacy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT scholars argue that the lived experiences of communities of color provide critical insight into racial systems that oppress them. For these reasons, narrative analysis through counter-storytelling was used to foreground these voices and challenge dominant ideologies – evoking critical and social awareness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Narrative analysis intersects with CRM and CRT, the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this study, particularly as it relates to storytelling, lived experiences, and challenging dominant discourses (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Riessman (2002) writes that "Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself" (p. 696). Additionally, Polkinghorne (1995) defines narrative analysis as "a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action" (p. 5). The responses of Jake, John, Lewis, Liam, Marquis, and Thomas facilitated the organization of data into a narrative that illustrates

their experiences as BMSAs. Utilizing narrative inquiry, I was able to discern their story and convey the content and meaning of the stories in a more holistic way for readers and other listeners (Jones et al., 2014).

To accomplish capturing the story, I began with the goal of constructing an organized narrative by using the interpretive framework drawing on the works of Riessman (2002), Labov (1978), and McCormack (2000). Labov (1972) asserts that narratives are stories that are about a specific past event that share common properties. McCormack (2000) argues that researchers can analyze data and interview transcripts from different perspectives to construct meaningful narratives. They highlight how participants' narratives reveal meaning through their storytelling, tone, and structure. My positionality, perspective and influence, and participant's background are essential to gaining deeper insights and constructing richer, more nuanced stories. McCormack (2000) states that viewing the interview transcript through multiple lenses involves the following:

1. Immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of active listening.
2. Identifying the narrative processes used by the storyteller.
3. Paying attention to the language of the text.
4. Acknowledging the context in which the text was produced; and
5. Identifying moments in the text where something unexpected is happening (p. 285).

Labov (1978) argues that stories have a kind of similar structure or logic to them. The interpretive story in my study is therefore largely constructed from the participant's own words to maintain their meaning and understanding of their experiences. Some of my own language, largely taken from the questions I asked during the interview itself, was added to make sense and

link otherwise fragmented sentences. It is intended that this research design will enable a richer understanding of BMSAs' experiences at Division II HWIs.

Next, I adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and shared meanings among participants. This approach provided a clear and practical framework for conducting thematic analysis. During all of these iterative processes, I employed different types and styles of coding to help establish links between broader patterns, ideas, or categories I saw (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The process generally unfolded as follows:

Step 1: Familiarization with the Data. I read and re-read the data to immerse myself in it to gain a deep understanding of the content before starting the coding process.

Step 2: Generated Initial Codes. After reviewing the interview transcripts and data, I identified codes to break down large amounts of data into manageable parts. Through this step, I recognized recurring themes or trends in the data.

Step 3: Generated Themes. I arranged the identified codes into broader categories. Codes with related meanings or ideas were grouped into preliminary categories. Where codes overlapped or referred to the same concept, they were consolidated into a single category to avoid redundancy. This iterative process involved continuously revisiting and refining the categories to ensure they captured the essence of the participants' responses.

Step 4: Reviewed Themes. The identified themes were thoroughly examined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The transcripts were reviewed to ensure alignment among the various codes and themes. Additionally, themes were compared to one another to ensure they were distinct and did not overlap.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes. Once the themes were finalized, I defined each and created detailed descriptions of what each theme represents, showing their uniqueness and impact.

Step 6: Write the Report. This step involves writing the analysis. In my analysis, I carefully considered the narratives that explain the themes. I used extracts from the data and related them back to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Overall, the data were analyzed using inductive reasoning, as I began the coding process without predefined codes or categories. Instead, I carefully reviewed each passage of text and allowed the codes to emerge naturally from the data, based on observable patterns. Inductive analysis is particularly suitable for exploratory research, especially when there is limited theory or understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This inductive approach enabled themes to organically emerge from the analysis of the participants' interviews. By integrating these approaches, I preserved the richness of the participants' narratives like in McCormack's (2000) approach while identifying broader themes and patterns, and like Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of BMSAs at HWIs.

LeCompte et al. (1993) assert that data analysis depends on theorizing. Furthermore, they argue that theorizing is a way to understand how and why things happen the way they do. Furthermore, they suggest theorizing involves perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Validity in CRT and CRM informed research does not rely on statistical generalizability but instead on establishing trustworthiness and rigor in the representation of lived experiences.

To support this, I engaged in several validation strategies. To ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative study, I employed strategies that enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with the participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, I integrated counter-storytelling as a foundation of establishing trustworthiness.

By centering the lived experiences of BMSAs, counter-storytelling provides a direct, unfiltered account of their realities, ensuring that findings are deeply rooted in their perspectives rather than researcher interpretations alone. Transferability is strengthened through rich, thick descriptions of participants' backgrounds, institutions, and sociocultural environments. Counter-stories provide rich, thick descriptions of racialized experiences. By prioritizing participants' voices, counter-storytelling minimizes researcher bias and ensures that interpretations are derived from authentic narratives rather than imposed assumptions. Dependability is established through an audit trail that documents research decisions, coding processes, and thematic developments, ensuring transparency and consistency. Counter-storytelling is not just a narrative tool; it is a methodological and epistemological approach that upholds the rigor of CRT research. It strengthens trustworthiness by ensuring that the study is not reproducing dominant ideologies but instead amplifying the voices and truths of those historically marginalized within educational and athletic institutions.

Additionally, purposeful sampling was utilized as a manner to identify the participants for the study. This approach built trustworthiness by ensuring that insights were drawn from BMSAs who have direct experience at NCAA Division II HWIs. Additionally, I engaged in reflexivity by inputting my positionality statement, acknowledging how my biases and

experiences may shape the research process. To uphold the integrity of the research and protect the rights of participants, ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

I am aware of the ethical responsibility I hold in representing my participants' narratives accurately and respectfully. I took deliberate steps to ensure the participants' voices were not only heard but also empowered within the research process. This included employing methodological approaches that prioritize participant agency, fostering trust, and maintaining transparency in how their stories were interpreted and shared. Through reflexivity, I acknowledged my role in shaping the research process and committed to a thoughtful, ethical, and culturally responsive approach that honored the experiences of BMSAs. Central to this study is protecting the participants to give them a sense of security to speak freely and openly to me. To achieve this, I asked the participants to work with me to develop a pseudonym to keep them anonymous. I explained the verbal consent form, process and confidentiality. Although each participant verbally agreed to participate in the study, I did explain the potential risks associated with this study, part of which included that by talking about their experiences as a Division II BMSA, they could trigger emotional or stressful memories. Additionally, although the participants' names will be kept confidential, an essential element of this research is their positionality or story. Stories that were unique to the participants may make it easy for those reading this paper to identify them. However, to mitigate these risks, I only asked participants to answer questions which they felt comfortable answering, and to the degree they deemed appropriate. In addition, I reminded the participants that the study is completely voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. See Appendix C for the verbal consent form that outlines other discussion points around risks and mitigating those risks.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of BMSAs at HWIs, certain limitations must be acknowledged. One potential drawback is participant bias due to my presence during interviews. Despite my efforts to create an environment that was comfortable and conducive for the participants, they may have adjusted their responses based on perceived expectations or assumptions because of my positionality (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, variations in participants' ability to articulate their experiences may impact the depth and clarity of the data collected, which presents a challenge — each participant was different in how they voiced their answers and thoughts to the research questions, which may impact the richness of the data collected and may lead to variations in the depth of thematic analysis.

Another limitation is the absence of a natural field setting (Creswell, 2014). While virtual interviews were ideal for the study, they have challenges that impact data collection. In-person interviews allow for stronger rapport with the participants through direct eye contact and body language, creating opportunities for the participants to open up more. Virtual interviews, on the other hand, may feel less personal and potentially elicit a reduced emotional connection between the participants and me. In addition, the flexibility of virtual interviews made it easier to collect data from participants in remote areas, although there still may be distractions around the participants or connectivity issues or technological issues. Moreover, despite the convenience and advantages of virtual interviews, external distractions, connectivity issues, or other technological challenges could have interfered with the interview process.

Anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) laws limited my research study by creating institutional environments that discourage or prohibit studies centered on marginalized groups. For my participants, this can increase feelings of vulnerability, making them less likely to share

openly due to fears of backlash or misrepresentation. The loss of safe spaces and community support further compounds these challenges, ultimately threatening both the authenticity and ethical integrity of qualitative research on BMSAs.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of BMSAs at HWIs, aiming to understand their lived experiences through CRM. I employed qualitative research methods to accurately represent the experiences of the participants while ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the rigorous process of thematic and narrative analysis and counter-storytelling, I sought to explore personal stories and identify recurring themes across multiple narratives from the participants by carefully examining the data to authentically portray the experiences of BMSAs at Division II HWIs.

CRM served as the foundational approach for this study, stressing the importance of counter-stories and narratives in amplifying the voices of people of color. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they allow participants to share their experiences in their own words. CRM illuminates racialized experiences and emphasizes the power of voice in research. This study will provide a platform for participants' narratives to be heard, challenging majoritarian assumptions and foster an intricate understanding of BMSA experiences. Building upon this methodological framework, the following chapter presents the findings of the study, highlighting the counter-narratives and lived experiences of BMSAs at HWIs. Through thematic analysis of participants' narratives, the chapter uncovers key themes that illustrate the impact of race, racism, and resilience in their educational and athletic journeys.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter begins with an introduction of each of the six participants and their individual narratives. Their backstory provides the foundation, context and depth necessary for interpretation and analysis. Each participant's background, personal beliefs, and academic aspirations contributed to a broader understanding of how their racialized experiences are impacted by institutional culture and social environments at Division II HWIs. In addition, their positionalities and histories are integral to how I analyzed the data, which I used to connect their personal narratives to broader discussions about racialized experiences, athletics, and higher education at Division II HWIs.

The six participants in this study are Black male student-athletes at Division II schools who were at least 18 years old and classified as a senior or graduate student entering the 2023-2024 academic year. Four out of the six participants reported that they participated in football, and two participated in men's basketball. The men's basketball athletes, John and Marquis, attended the same university. Two of the four football athletes, Jake and Liam, attended the same university as well. As a reminder, see Table 2 below as it provides a detailed overview of each participant's demographic information, sport affiliation, and institutional context, offering further insight into their backgrounds and experiences.

Table 2

Participants

	Name	Age	Admissions Classification	Sport	Higher Education Institution
1	Jake	24	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Texas
2	John	21	Senior	Men's Basketball	University in the western region of Texas
3	Lewis	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Arkansas
4	Liam	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Texas
5	Marquis	23	Senior	Men's Basketball	University in the western region of Texas
6	Thomas	22	Graduate	Football	University in the southern region of Arkansas

Jake's Story

Jake was a key player and major contributor to his football team, demonstrating both talent and dedication on the field. As a nonresident student-athlete — someone who attends a college or university outside their home state or country — he navigated the challenges of competing in a new environment while striving for athletic and academic success. Within the NCAA framework, nonresident student-athletes include both domestic out-of-state students and international athletes. Jake's journey was particularly unique, as he previously competed at a Junior College and another Division II HWI in the Midwest region of the United States. Despite the transitions and recruitment opportunities, his unwavering passion for the game fueled his commitment to continue playing football at the collegiate level. Jake shares:

> Through my [inaudible] of high school, I didn't have any offers anywhere to play football. So, I had an opportunity to go play at a junior college…I went there for five days, but I didn't like it. It just wasn't a fit for me. So, I left, and I took a whole year off for college completely.

Jake eventually reconnected with a friend and former teammate who encouraged him to join the Division II institution he was attending. Now a graduate student, Jake is on the verge of earning his master's degree and preparing for life after college, with aspirations of becoming a physical therapist. He holds strong convictions about his beliefs, always striving to do more — or as he puts it, "upping the ante" — when it comes to supporting Black lives. Additionally, he shares a deep bond with his parents, crediting their support as instrumental in his academic success.

The traditional recruitment path in NCAA football follows a structured process, beginning with early skill development and exposure through high school, club teams, and

showcases. College coaches assess athletes based on performance, game film, and physical attributes, leading to scholarship offers and commitments. Once eligibility requirements are met, athletes transition to collegiate athletics, balancing academic and athletic demands. While this is the standard route, some take alternative paths, such as transferring from junior colleges or facing late recruitment. Jake's journey exemplifies a non-traditional route taken by some Black male student-athletes, as he first competed at a junior college before transferring to another Division II institution. Without an athletic scholarship out of high school, he encountered obstacles in the recruiting process, highlighting the challenges of securing a spot at the collegiate level. His story also underscores the vital role of family support in navigating the complexities of college athletics.

John's Story

John was a highly sought-after recruit coming out of high school, earning athletics scholarship offers from Division I, Division II, and Junior College programs. As a standout athlete, he played a pivotal role in leading his high school team to a State Championship and amassed an impressive list of accolades, including three-time All-State honors, as well as all-region, district, area, and tournament recognitions. Before transferring to his current institution, John competed at another Division II HWI in the South region of the United States, further shaping his collegiate athletic journey. Beyond football, John expressed that one of the most meaningful aspects of his life is fatherhood—something he feels both excited about and deeply grateful for. He credits his family as his greatest source of inspiration and motivation, driving him to excel both on and off the field. He stated:

> Family played a big part, big part. I wouldn't be here without them to this day. And so, and I just thank them for everything they're doing and they're going to do. But, in my

> family, I wouldn't be able to do anything without their help… Like cover, cover multiple expenses, (i.e., food, gas for my car, rent, extra stuff for like, basketball shoes or like groceries). So, family played a big part. I wouldn't be able to do anything without my family.

John has strong desires to play professional basketball but realized that his path would change due to becoming a father. He explained:

> In my time in college my freshman year, I had a daughter, and my daughter's back home where I currently reside. So life hit me, and it was just kind of like learning that you can go play professional but how, much how much money are they gonna give you? How will this help me? And, I don't really want to go over and cross the water, just leave my daughter to get the beginning pay. It's not enough. But I can do something more. I can be working on my degree and making a good amount of money by taking care of myself as well as my daughter. So, I started out to be a professional, but like I said my daughter came along, and so I had to change my reality to get my degree and finish off my degree so I can go get a good job or work on deadline in the future to take care of us.

John was determined to outwork everyone—both on and off the court—knowing that his relentless effort would not only position him for success in the classroom but also pave the way for graduation and the ability to provide for his family. His story highlights the delicate balance between professional aspirations and personal responsibilities, particularly fatherhood. It underscores the difficult choices BMSAs must make as they navigate career and educational paths shaped by familial obligations—an experience that is both emotionally complex and deeply challenging.

Lewis's Story

Lewis was heavily recruited by multiple programs across the United States coming out of high school, ultimately beginning his college career as a Division I football student-athlete. However, after being cut from the team due to performance, he faced a difficult reality — while several Division I and II programs were open to letting him try out or walk on, scholarship opportunities were scarce, particularly among the non-Division I schools that showed interest. Determined to continue his football career, Lewis transferred to a Division II HWI in the Southwest region of the United States. His journey didn't stop there; he later transferred again to another Division II HWI in the South, where he currently resides as a graduate student. Looking ahead, Lewis plans to take a gap year after graduation, expressing a strong desire to travel and explore the world. His story underscores the challenges of collegiate athletics, where performance can dictate opportunities, while also highlighting the importance of personal growth beyond sports and the uncertainty that student-athletes face when navigating their future.

Liam's Story

Liam's story is one of resilience, purpose, and a deep sense of responsibility to those who came before him and those who will follow. Born in New Orleans and now a Division II football player in Texas, he reflects on the hardships he has overcome, including surviving Hurricane Katrina, which claimed over 1,500 lives — an experience he describes as both bittersweet and a blessing. Despite the challenges, he embraces his journey as part of a greater purpose, recognizing that his success is not just for himself but for his family and community and that God has a plan for him. He stated:

> The will of God will not take you where the grace of God will not protect you…and, no matter where you go, God will always have his hand on you and protect you…always be grateful and humble for the circumstances and situations God placed you in and opportunities that he's blessed you with as well. Like because these things can be taken away in an instant.

For Liam, playing college football is about more than personal achievement; it's about paving the way for others. He carries the dreams of his older cousins, his mother, and his siblings—those who didn't have the same opportunities. He believes his journey serves as a stepping stone for the next generation, inspiring his younger cousins and others in his community to see that success is possible. He takes pride in being a role model, emphasizing that his presence on the field and in the classroom is proof that hard work, faith, and perseverance can lead to meaningful accomplishments.

At the heart of Liam's perspective is an unwavering pride in his identity. He describes being Black as both beautiful and powerful, acknowledging the historical struggles of African Americans while celebrating their resilience, culture, and strength. He believes that embracing Black identity with pride and positivity can be transformative, not only for individuals but for entire communities. He stated:

> I get to wake up and be African American every day. It's a privilege. My life can be taken away at any second. But because I've embraced that role and embrace what God has blessed me with and put me here for a reason. I do think it is like def - I definitely love being Black and beautiful. It's a privilege.

At his core, Liam takes immense pride in his identity, celebrating Blackness as both beautiful and powerful. For him, embracing Black identity with pride and purpose is not just personal — it's transformational for his community and future generations.

Marquis's Story

Marquis's story is one of perseverance, faith, and adaptability. Growing up in a predominantly Black community in the Southwest, he always dreamed of playing college basketball but struggled to receive athletics scholarship offers. Coaches often overlooked him due to his size, but his dedication and skill development eventually earned him interest from colleges. He chose to attend a Division II HWI in the Southwest, where he found a supportive environment that valued him both as an athlete, student, and man.

Though initially disappointed by the lack of Division I opportunities, Marquis embraced his journey and made the most of his experience. He overcame self-doubt and accepted a redshirt year – he was included on the team roster and practiced with the team, but did not compete or receive travel benefits for one academic year or two full-time semesters – and gradually earned his place on the team. Despite facing challenges with playing time in his final season, he remained committed to contributing however he could to his nationally ranked team.

Beyond basketball, Marquis prioritizes academics and has a strong sense of purpose. Majoring in criminal justice, he aspires to become an FBI special agent, emphasizing the importance of education for Black men in overcoming societal barriers. He believes in working harder to earn recognition and wants to inspire others to pursue excellence beyond sports.

His faith plays a central role in his journey, guiding his decisions and reinforcing his belief that every challenge has a purpose. Marquis encourages Black student-athletes to consider his school, challenging misconceptions about the region and emphasizing the welcoming

community. His story underscores resilience, adaptability, and the value of embracing opportunities beyond athletics.

Thomas's Story

Thomas, a standout high school athlete from a historically successful football program in the Mid-South, faced limited scholarship offers despite his talent. His high school produced numerous Division I and Division II athletes, and several former players went on to play in the NFL. Aspiring to go pro, Thomas saw any opportunity to play football as a step toward achieving his dream. He valued financial support, particularly athletic aid, as a means to reduce his family's financial burden. While his parents were supportive, Thomas wanted to minimize out-of-pocket expenses and avoid taking on heavy student loans, especially since he also aimed to become a doctor.

His decision to attend a Division II institution was primarily influenced by the financial benefits it provided, helping him fund his education while continuing to play football. Although he initially aspired to play at a Division I level, Thomas felt that Division II offered the best opportunity for both academics and athletics. Being a Division II student-athlete was significant to him, not only because it allowed him to pursue his passion for football but also because it gave him the chance to make a meaningful impact on his team's culture. He wanted to contribute fully, regardless of his role.

Despite knowing that Division I athletes have easier access to limelight and exposure, Thomas acknowledges that Division II players still have opportunities to succeed, citing a friend who made it to the NFL. Reflecting on his college journey, Thomas has no regrets about his choices. He values the friendships, the opportunity to start, and the memorable experience of

winning a bowl game. His time at his institution has taught him the importance of hard work and perseverance.

Thomas's story underscores the financial challenges that BMSAs face and highlights the impact of hard work, resilience, and determination to overcome those obstacles. He believes in the philosophy that "you get in what you put out," emphasizing that no matter how hard you work, there's always room to improve. His journey illustrates how these qualities shape the experiences and success of BMSAs.

With a clear understanding of the participants' backgrounds and perspectives, this chapter now shifts focus to the findings of the study.

An Introductory Explanation of Key Findings and Themes

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which aimed to explore (1) how BMSAs at Division II HWIs navigate their academic and athletic experiences; and (2) explore the challenges and opportunities that shape the college experiences of BMSAs at Division II HWIs. Using semi-structured interviews, participants shared their perspectives on athletic and academic challenges and racialized experiences. Given the unique positionalities of BMSAs within collegiate athletics and higher education, this study highlights the structural and individual factors that shape the six participants' experiences. To present the findings in a clear and structured way, this chapter is organized around the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. The findings are structured as follows:

Theme 1: Rethinking Athletic Success: Embracing Broader Paths Beyond Division I.

Theme 2: Division II as a Supportive Family.

Theme 3: Sports Don't Last Forever: Develop a Plan and Find Success.

Theme 4: Navigating Hostile Territory at Historically White Institutions.

Theme 1: Rethinking Athletic Success: Embracing Broader Paths Beyond Division I

This theme captures the journey from internalizing the cultural and familial pressure to achieve Division I status toward embracing Division II as a legitimate and enriching pathway for BMSAs. Despite growing up with a strong legacy and expectation to play at the Division I level, each participant recounted experiences that prompted a reevaluation of what success in collegiate athletics truly means. Rather than viewing Division II as a compromise or a lesser option, they recognized it as a platform that offers authentic connection, personal growth, and even opportunities to advance professionally for BMSAs. This shift reflects a broader discussion of collegiate athletic identity — One that values realistic opportunities and personal fulfillment that come from engaging with a system that aligns more closely with BMSAs' unique experiences and aspirations.

All six of the participants described a desire to play for an NCAA Division I institution. Lewis was the only participant who participated in Division I before transferring to a Division II institution. John showed a strong interest in wanting to participate at the Division I level if he had the opportunity to pick his university again. The sub-themes below will explore why these participants ultimately sought to embrace broader paths beyond Division I.

The Prestige and Pressure of Division I Athletics

Family legacy and expectations of attending a Division I institution was a point of emphasis for these BMSAs. Familial influences initially shaped their aspirations and how those expectations affected their self-perception and career decisions. Jake shared about his family history and the expectations of going Division I. He stated:

> Coming out of high school, I've always wanted to just because my uncle had played at the University of Miami, my dad went to Grambling State, my other uncle played for the

> University of Washington. So, there was like a background of my family where you go Division I and then you have an aspect of the NFL, NBA.

Jake also alluded to the scrutiny he received from his family for not going Division I. He shared: "They…always supported me and was happy about my decision that I made but, I also felt like there was some kind of disdain from it." John added, "I just wanted to go play college basketball…So, I was always trying to get away to try to get to the D1 level". He further explained:

> I was receiving some D1 interest…I just wanted to go play at the next level of playing college basketball…the university really didn't matter as long as I was getting my education paid for and I was going to do something I love, which is playing basketball at the next level.

For my participants, family history and legacy played a significant role in shaping their aspirations, with Division I seen as the pinnacle of success. According to Comeaux and Harrison (2011), familial and cultural expectations significantly influence the athletic and academic identities of BMSAs, often reinforcing the belief that Division I is the primary route to success. Growing up in environments where relatives had competed at the highest collegiate levels, participants internalized the belief that Division I was expected and the ideal path. This expectation not only influenced their initial goals but also shaped their self-perception — leading some to feel pressure, scrutiny, or even disappointment when their journey took a different route.

Liam stated, "In junior college it just was like D1 or bust; You don't go D1, you're not really an athlete…" He further explained, "Kids think if they don't go D1, they can't make it to the NFL, make to CFL, or anything because they're not at the D1 level." Thomas supported this idea that going Division I comes with its set of perks and benefits. It creates pathways to

professional leagues and opportunities to play on a national stage like ESPN. Thomas came from a well-known high school with a strong football program that regularly sent players to the Division I level and produced exceptional athletes. He shared the following:

> For me, D1 was pretty significant because I came from a very big high school. They're known for sending a lot of players to Division I and they're known for being a really dominant football team. I thought I had the skills to be one of those, but I did not obviously; I played Division II. But that was just kind of the thing and it's kind of just everyone's dream to you know, go play on ESPN; Go make plays on ESPN.

Division I was perceived as the ideal pathway to success and to becoming a professional athlete. Singer (2019) supported this belief in his study, *Education Matters Then and Now: A Case Study of Teammates in a Big-Time College Football Program*. This study focused on the journeys and experiences of BMSA's at Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCU). One of his participants asserted that he chose Division I over Division II, Division III, or HBCUs because he saw it as a lucrative pathway toward upward mobility.

For some of my participants, the pressure to follow in the footsteps of relatives who competed at the highest collegiate level influenced their self-perception and career decisions. However, the reality of their athletic journey sometimes diverged from these expectations, leading to mixed emotions about their ultimate path. While Division I was often associated with prestige, exposure, and professional opportunities, participants also grappled with the contrast between these ideals and the realities of competing at the Division II level.

The Reality of Division II Athletics

Marquis's experience highlights the tension between the idealized dream of BMSAs playing Division I and the reality of navigating recruitment opportunities. While he initially

aspired to compete at the highest level, a lack of recognition from Division I programs forced him to reassess his options. He stated:

> I never really got any recognition from any, like, Division I programs. And so, I mean, obviously, I think everybody's dream is to, you know, play Division I, but I kind of seen for myself, I've seen like that I kind of had to look into reality and kind of look at different options.

Marquis recognized feelings of uncertainty of playing his sport due to being overlooked by Division I schools because of his body size. Marquis explained, “I always felt like D1 coaches just looked over me because maybe my height…And I felt like I've always had the tools to play on that level.” However, in his senior year, his focus shifted from wanting to play for Division I to securing meaningful opportunities to play. Marquis further explained:

> Once I got to the end of my senior year, I was already talking to a Division II Institution. Playing in Division I didn't really matter to me anymore. I just wanted to play somewhere. I wanted to have an opportunity to play, and these Division II coaches were willing to give me an opportunity to play.

The opportunities presented to Marquis contributed towards reshaping his perspective on the collegiate experience and ultimately what it meant for a BMSA to succeed as a collegiate athlete. Another changed perspective includes Lewis. He initially started at a Division I institution and faced the reality of being cut from that team due to performance, which forced him to reconsider his options. Lewis repeatedly referred to his experience at the Division I institution as a business environment, where athletes in general are treated as assets rather than individuals. He explained, “The Division I university, when I was there, felt very much just like a job and very businesslike. It wasn't very casual.” Lewis explained further that although

Division II was financially less resourced compared to Division I, he felt more of a personal connection and support from coaches and staff at the Division II institution. He stated:

> Once I got to DII it's like, obviously, they don't have the resources that D1 institutions have and so forth…When I was talking to Division II coaches, I felt like okay, you know, you will relate a little bit more to what I'm trying to say. Maybe it's because of their background. That's a possibility, but it felt more like I was talking to a human being than just a person that's just above it.

This shift in perspective and environment for Lewis helped him realize that there's more to college than the inherent business of college sports itself. Relationships matter, and a sense of belonging matters more than status.

Liam contributed to this point regarding the Division II environment by sharing how there is innate value in Division II for BMSAs. It's not a step down but an opportunity to still achieve his educational and professional aspirations. He stated, "Now that I'm at the D2 level, there's just as much here as there is at the D1 level…And I just [pause] D2 is the next best thing. And it was actually, it furthers my educational career as well." Liam also said:

> Coming to D2 to seeing guys still go to the NFL and CFL and all that just opened up my eyes to like, if you got the skills, you got the talent, you're mature enough, you're disciplined enough and you can carry the workload, you can go to play professional football.

Theme Summary

The theme explores the evolution of BMSAs' perspectives on Division I and Division II athletics. Initially, many BMSAs, influenced by family expectations and cultural legacies, viewed Division I as the ultimate path to success. The pressure to follow in the footsteps of

relatives who played at Division I institutions led some to internalize Division I as the ideal route for professional advancement, even though it was often associated with prestige, exposure, and opportunities in professional sports.

However, as their collegiate careers progressed, experiences such as being overlooked by Division I programs, facing personal setbacks, or struggling with the impersonal, business-like nature of Division I led many participants to reconsider their aspirations. This prompted a shift, as Division II began to be recognized not as a second-tier option, but as a legitimate and enriching alternative. For several participants, Division II offered a more personal, supportive environment, fostering meaningful relationships with coaches and staff and offering opportunities for personal growth, educational fulfillment, and even professional advancement. Despite fewer resources as Division I, Division II allowed BMSAs to thrive within a system better aligned with their individual experiences and aspirations. This shift in perspective highlights the broader conversation about collegiate athletic identity, one that prioritizes holistic success, personal fulfillment, and realistic opportunities for BMSAs, moving away from the narrow view that Division I is the only path to success. The participants saw Division II as a practical alternative that impacted them beyond the game itself and supported them like a family. It was not just a compromise, but a continued growth beyond the games itself they played.

Theme 2: Division II as a Supportive Family

The participants talked about navigating their experiences beyond their sport and having a sense of community, family, and institutional support to enhance their experiences as BMSAs. They emphasized the importance of academic and career preparation and the benefit of attending an institution and playing for a coach in what some considered a “family” environment. Liam and Marquis explicitly referred to the campus and athletic culture at their Division II HWI like

"family." Specifically, Liam stated, "I feel like it's [pause] a… it's a rare feeling to know that the whole university is behind you…Everybody's on board with the football team and, uh, they treat you well; and it's a lot like family." Marquis shared:

> For D2, I think it means a lot because definitely here at this Division II institution, this community is small, but they treat the athletes like family. Like if you ever need something you can reach out. If your car's ever in trouble, they will be there to pick you up or just things like that in the community. Everybody in the community is very nice. And it just, it just feels like a home. It just feels like a home away from home to me.

These two participants described a personal connection to Division II and a sense of holistic support and belonging at their HWI. Jake spoke about the coaching staff and administrators at his institution and explained how at his HWI, they treat you with respect and care and look after you. He even described how one of the coaches used to coach him at his previous institution, which expands the thought of holistic support for him and BMSAs. Jake shared:

> It was just the atmosphere when I came here, how everybody was – I'd never – I didn't feel that at the other colleges I visited. And just the history of how players are, the coaching staff. It was just like the right thing for me….

The atmosphere and environment were important to Jake. The feeling he derived from them created a sense of belonging for him. He further explained:

> What I liked about here was the coaching staff. All of them treat you with respect. All of them will take care of you. They will look after you. You're like, basically you're one of their own. And that's what I always loved. Coming into it, one of the coaches here actually coached me at my last school.

This strong sense of community and support not only fosters personal and academic growth for BMSAs but also empowers them to use their platform for advocacy and activism, challenging systemic barriers, inequities, and advocating for equality and greater equity within collegiate athletics and beyond.

Community, Belonging, and Activism

For the participants, family included receiving institutional support in challenging social injustice. It is not only about advocating for social justice but also about fostering institutional accountability in creating environments that prioritize holistic support, belonging, success beyond athletics, and challenging systemic inequities. This theme, Division II as a Supportive Family, underscores the importance of strong community ties, mentorship, and institutional investment in the well-being of BMSAs. The participants expressed opportunities that permitted them to leverage their collective voices to demand institutional commitment to equity and social change, ensuring that Division II HWIs maintain and expand the family-oriented, supportive environments that many participants valued. This collective advocacy aligns with broader social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), which emerged as a response to systemic inequities and has inspired Black student-athletes and other advocates to use their platforms to push for institutional change and racial justice within collegiate athletics.

The BLM movement began in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager in Florida. The movement was founded by three Black women activists — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi— who created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to call attention to racial injustice, police violence, and systemic oppression (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021).

BLM gained national prominence in 2014 following the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. Protests erupted across the U.S., demanding justice and accountability for police brutality. Over the years, BLM has grown into a global movement, advocating for policy changes, racial equity, and social justice (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021). The movement saw a resurgence in 2020 after the killing of George Floyd, whose death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer sparked worldwide protests and renewed conversations about racial injustice and police reform.

Jake participated in a BLM walk from his school to a local park, inspired by his friends who emphasized the importance of speaking up against racial stereotypes. He was further motivated by events such as the "I can't breathe" incident, which led to an increased push for activism on his campus. While his school had Black Student Union meetings discussing Black historical figures and organizing events like a Martin Luther King celebration, broader community activism was limited until the walk occurred. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted further efforts. Within his athletics department, activism was mostly led by individual student-athletes rather than the department itself, which Jake perceived as hesitant to engage due to concerns about appearing biased. He expressed frustration at the institution's reluctance to fully support racial justice initiatives, emphasizing the need for equal treatment rather than favoritism. He stated:

> I was involved in the uh, uh Black Lives Matter walk from my school campus down to the park, and my friends. My friends got me involved and they were basically telling me like that we don't speak up for ourselves then who will? And it was great because we got the community to come out and it was a good movement.

John described his experience at a previous Division II institution where he and his teammates sought to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's death. They requested permission to wear BLM shirts during warm-ups at home games as a symbolic gesture of support. While this was the extent of their activism, the movement deeply influenced John, motivating him to work harder academically and athletically to challenge negative stereotypes about Black men. He also reflected on the lack of institutional activism at his institution, where there was little visible support for BLM. When asked about his or his institution's involvement in activism efforts for social justice, John shared the following:

> Speaking on that, yeah, I can't say we were involved at my last institution. I was at another division two, that was closer back to home. And around that time, it was a trend… the Black Lives Matter trend when George Floyd passed away and I remember what me and my teammates, we just came up together and asked our coaches and our athletic director, was it okay if we got shirts made to wear only for our home games? To wear up for a warmup just to represent a shout out to show to show our support that's going around the world that that can be pertained to George Floyd or just for Black lives matter in general.

John shared further regarding activism at his campus:

> I can say that was the only thing and I just didn't say that would come and inspire me just to go hard to go harder… How Black males or Black people are just targeted or represented or figured to be to be made out to other people, whether it's, whether it is socially, whether it's people from different colors, schooling. These are other examples that's maybe you just want to go hard at this to finish out school to get my grades really honestly.

The cultural and linguistic differences, combined with concerns about safety in an unfamiliar environment, created a sense of isolation for John's predominantly Black basketball team. Despite these challenges, John and his teammates relied on one another for support, choosing to keep their frustrations in-house rather than risk conflict or backlash. John shared this story:

> So going through the year as everything would go on with the Black Lives Matter. It kind of frustrated us a little bit but we really didn't want to speak out our concerns because we didn't want to step on anybody's toes, or we didn't want to make anybody mad. So, we just had to keep it in-house in between us and support each other down there for the time being to make sure we were all good. So that's how I'd say it was.

Lewis described his experience of activism at his institution in 2020, when Black student-athletes organized a march and attempted to influence change following the death of George Floyd. They voted representatives into a leadership role and traveled regionally to raise awareness of racial issues in the state, including the ongoing problem of racism. Despite their efforts, Lewis expressed uncertainty about whether their actions made a lasting impact. He contrasted this activism with his time at other institutions, where he felt disconnected and noted that one of his other HWIs was politically chaotic and less involved in activism. At his current institution, although the athletic department participated in the activism, the wider campus remained largely uninvolved, which Lewis found normal, as he had often witnessed the bystander effect in various situations. Despite the lack of broader campus participation, he felt that their activism had some impact, though many others simply didn't pay attention to issues that didn't directly affect them. Lewis shared his thoughts when asked about how he felt seeing the student-athletes engage in activism and not seeing the greater portion of the campus doing the same. He stated:

> It felt normal. I'm not going to lie to you, it felt normal. We'll see it every day…I've seen it just throughout my life, just the bystander effect. I'm not gonna say, I don't have that for a lot of different situations, but that is normalized. When we try to make our difference. I felt like it helped at least a little bit. To a lot of other people that doesn't affect them. They're just not going to pay it any mind. So, I felt normal. I've seen it before. I still see it today.

Liam participated in a march in his city following the George Floyd incident, motivated by the thought that such an event could have happened to him or his loved ones. He felt the need to stand up for something bigger than himself. While he was aware of activism on campus, he did not recall specific activism within the athletics department. He mentioned that there were some events on campus related to George Floyd, including visits from his family.

Marquis shared that he had not participated in any racial justice activism during his time at college, citing a lack of resources and opportunities to get involved. He mentioned that no one had stepped forward to create a group specifically for Black males on campus, and while he acknowledged that he may feel hesitant or scared to take that step, he hasn't pursued it. However, he has used his social media platform to raise awareness about the case of his cousin, a Black man, who was wrongfully convicted of murder in a state in the Southwest Region of the United States. Marquis has advocated for his cousin's innocence, aiming to bring attention to his case and encourage others to support it. Regarding activism on campus, Marquis stated that he is unaware of any racial justice efforts or activism, either within the general campus community or the athletics department. He speculated that this lack of activism might be due to the absence of

significant racial issues or disputes on campus, as everyone is familiar with each other and treats one another like family. As a result, he believes there hasn't been a pressing need for racial activism on campus.

Thomas shared that he participated in walks for racial justice in the Southwest Region of the United States, motivated by a desire to spread love in response to the hate he saw in the world, as inspired by his faith. He participated for personal peace of mind, not sure if his actions would make a significant impact. He was supported by some friends from athletics, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he was unable to participate with his teammates. During that time, his head coach held a Zoom meeting to discuss the situation, emphasizing the importance of love and offering support to the team. Thomas shared:

> I participated in a few of the walks... I just felt like at that time there was a lot of hate in the world. And I just wanted to be the one to spread love. I mean, that's what the Bible tells us to do: Spread love; Spread God's word. And that was what I felt my calling was like no matter what it was, just there needed to be more love in the world when there was a lot of hate at that time.

On campus, Thomas was aware of activism led by the Black Student Union, which raised money for charitable donations and was active in supporting racial justice causes. Although he was uncertain about the involvement of the athletics department, he noted that athletes, including some from football and other sports, participated in these efforts. Seeing other athletes involved made him feel supported, knowing that others shared his values, even if they weren’t all Black. He was unable to join the Black Student Union’s activities due to time constraints from his challenging academic and athletic commitments but appreciated the diverse and inclusive support from fellow students. Thomas shared:

So, I know there was for a fact the Black Student Union and whether athletics was involved I can't speak on that. I was not a part of it. But so, the Black Student Union did a lot of activism; They raised money to go donate towards charities at that time. And they were actually very active on the campus. Uh, I do not believe athletics was involved, but I cannot say that for a fact.

Theme Summary

The participants in the study described the strong sense of community, belonging, and institutional support they experienced as Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) at their Division II Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Many emphasized the importance of feeling connected not only to their teams but also to the larger campus community, often referring to it as a "family." Liam and Marquis, in particular, highlighted the personal connections they forged with their institutions, where athletes were treated with care and respect. For them, the support they received from coaches, administrators, and the community created a sense of "home away from home."

This sense of community extended beyond athletics, fostering both personal and academic growth. It also empowered BMSAs to leverage their platforms for activism. They were inspired by movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) to challenge systemic inequities, particularly in collegiate athletics. Several participants took part in activism related to racial justice, often driven by personal motivations linked to their experiences or those of loved ones. Jake, for example, participated in a BLM walk and was motivated by a desire to speak out against racial injustice, while John and his teammates sought solidarity by wearing BLM shirts during warm-ups at home games.

Despite these efforts, participants observed that activism within their athletics departments was often driven by individual athletes rather than the institutional leadership. Some institutions were hesitant to fully engage in activism, with concerns about appearing biased or not wanting to alienate other groups. Lewis noted that despite the activism within the athletic department, the broader campus remained largely uninvolved, which he considered normal, having seen similar disengagement in other contexts throughout his life.

While some participants, like Marquis, had not engaged in activism due to limited opportunities or resources, others, like Thomas, used social media platforms to raise awareness about racial injustice. Motivated by faith and a desire to spread love in response to hate, Thomas took part in walks for racial justice, although COVID-19 prevented him from participating with teammates. He acknowledged the efforts of the Black Student Union on campus, which raised funds for charitable donations and provided support for racial justice causes, even if the athletics department itself was not directly involved.

Overall, the theme of Division II as a Supportive Family underscores the importance of institutional support, community ties, and mentorship in fostering an environment where BMSAs feel empowered to pursue both academic success and social change. It underscores the need for athletics departments and campuses to be more involved in advocating for racial justice and creating environments that prioritize the well-being and holistic development of student-athletes. The participants' collective activism, driven by personal experiences and a shared commitment to racial justice, reflects broader social justice movements and calls for greater accountability and equity within collegiate athletics.

Theme 3: Sports Don't Last Forever, Develop a Plan and Find Success

The participants have come to terms with the inevitable end of their collegiate or professional basketball and football careers. Acknowledging this reality, they openly discussed their goals, plans, and insights related to their athletic and academic journeys. When asked to share advice for BMSAs considering their institution, the participants offered valuable perspectives, emphasizing the importance of both immediate and long-term growth. Their responses reflect a deep understanding of the balance between athletic achievement and preparing for life beyond sports. Marquis and Jake emphasized the importance of having a backup plan beyond professional sports, shifting their focus to other professional aspirations. Jake stated:

> The bigger goal was always to make it professionally…the sub goal always was to graduate from college…I always wanted to become a therapist. The only way I know I'm gonna get into physical therapy school was if my grades remained how they were supposed to. So, know that I had that life dream. I had made sure I took the steps to get there.

Similarly, Marquis shared:

> It's always been a dream of mine to go play pro…I don't really think I have that much film, especially … this year to really show any type of professional scouts that, hey, I'm ready for the pros and anything like that. And that's why I kind of looked at my plan B option because at the end of day, I've always wanted to do law enforcement. I've always wanted to be a special agent in the FBI.

Marquis and Jake shifted their perspective regarding their transitions beyond sports from aspiring to being a professional athlete to using their degree for a professional career outside of their sport. Marquis reflected:

> I know that God has greater things for me than basketball. So, um, so yeah, I mean, it would be nice to go pro, but I know at the end of the day the ball is gonna stop bouncing for everybody, and everybody's gonna have to fall back on other plans. So, I'm okay with not going pro.

The participants recognized and knew that playing sports has limitations and that their basketball and football careers would come to an end. Understanding this reality, the participants shared their plans, goals, and insights regarding their athletic and academic experiences. Their aspirations shifted from becoming professional athletes to using their degrees to build careers outside of their sport, emphasizing the need to balance their academic and athletic experiences to prepare for life beyond college and for their future careers.

Academic and Athletic Balance for Black Male Student-Athletes

Several of the participants emphasized that success in academics and athletics is essential to their experiences. In providing their insights, the participants mentioned several key strategies they deemed necessary to find balance for BMSAs. John commented:

> Make sure you always keep that communication with your professors. Never try to step on your professors' toes. Always let your professors know what days you're going to be gone…Always try to show up to class a couple minutes early. Sit in front of the class if you have to.

John stressed the importance of strong communication for BMSAs with professors. By building relationships with them and maintaining academic accountability, BMSAs can ensure

they stay on track academically despite having a demanding sports schedule. John further elaborates:

> You've got to go study; you've got to go to the library; You have to go to the financial aid office…You've got to go sit down and talk to your coach. You have to go sit down and sign autographs for little kids…If you're willing and in your heart you're willing and dedicated to do it, you will be successful. But if you're not willing to put in the work to be successful, you won't be successful in this at all.

Similarly, Thomas emphasized the need for a strong work ethic and perseverance to navigate college life as a BMSA. He stated:

> I feel like if you come in with the mindset that you're going to be the hardest worker. To be the best, you know, just have that chip on your shoulder no matter what it is. Just come in with that chip; come in with the work ethic that no matter what, you will get your opportunity to shine. As long as you put the work in. I mean, there's going to be trials and tribulations wherever you go. It's not always going to be smooth sailing, but you have to just take those in stride and keep going. And that consistency is going to be one of your greatest assets.

Lewis highlighted the importance of support systems and sticking together as BMSAs at HWIs as a strategy to find balance between academics and athletics. He stated, "Stick together. Just try to stick together…. Obviously, we have disagreements within a group, with anybody, but that's just us trying to stay together." Lewis explained that his institution is in a remote area and there is not much community outside of campus. He described going an hour and a half outside of campus in every direction and not seeing a lot of opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities or community events; he felt isolated. As a strategic move to counter this feeling,

Lewis mentioned that, “You have to make it a good experience. So, you gotta make an effort. If you don't, you'll go crazy just being over there [at the Division II institution in a remote area], just because there's nothing to do.”

Another strategy mentioned by the participants deemed necessary for BMSAs to find balance between academics and athletics and achieve success is self-awareness and personal development. Lewis shared:

> I will say just try to be yourself. Don't try to be someone that you're not. You know, obviously people are different. They're going to have different cliques just throughout life but be yourself and people will gravitate towards you…everyone's going to mesh in some way shape or form.

Liam identified both his faith and racial identity as foundational to his personal growth and success. He emphasized the importance of self-awareness and spiritual grounding, noting that trusting in God’s plan has guided him since his first year in college, even when he was far from home. He shared a mantra that has sustained him: “The will of God will not take you where the grace of God will not protect you.” For Liam, this belief instilled a deep sense of purpose and resilience. He also expressed pride in his Black identity, describing it as both a blessing and a privilege. Despite the risks and challenges that come with being a Black man in America, Liam affirmed his love for who he is, stating, “I definitely love being Black and beautiful.” By embracing his faith and identity, he finds strength, purpose, and pride in his lived experience. Liam shared this:

> First and foremost, I tell them, the will of God will not take you where the grace of God will not protect you. And that's something I've been on since my freshman year of college, and I was six hours away from home at the junior college in West Texas. But

> that is something like man, no matter where you go, God will always have his hand on you and protecting you.

Liam further shared:

> I get to wake up and be African American every day. It's a privilege. My life can be taken away at any second. I've embraced that role and embrace what God has blessed me with and put me here for a reason. I do think it is like Def - I definitely love being Black and beautiful. It's a privilege.

Lewis emphasized the importance of BMSAs staying true to themselves and remaining authentic throughout their journey. Thomas highlighted the significance of maintaining a strong work ethic, coupled with having a "chip on your shoulder," as essential for achieving success. Liam expressed the privileges of being Black and trusting in God's plan. Each participant underscored that success in both athletics and academics demands an unwavering commitment to putting in the necessary effort, resilience, and determination to overcome challenges and reach their goals.

Theme Summary

BMSAs are acutely aware that their collegiate careers — and potentially their professional careers — will eventually come to an end. The advice shared by Jake, John, Lewis, Marquis, and Thomas offers valuable insight into their athletic and academic journeys, as well as practical guidance for navigating both realms. With this awareness, they emphasized the critical importance of having a well-thought-out plan for the future, putting in the necessary hard work, staying grounded in the present moment, and fully utilizing available support systems. They also underscored the value of making meaningful connections, forming lasting friendships, and embracing the sense of family within their communities, all of which they identified as key

opportunities that can lead to success, fulfillment, and personal growth in their lives. While these strategies give insight into pathways of academic and athletic success in sports and life beyond sports, their journeys are shaped by persistent challenges regarding the participants' identity and systemic inequities.

Theme 4: Navigating Hostile Territory at Historically White Institutions

In the collegiate sports industry, the term "hostile territory" is used to describe environments where visiting teams on an opponent's field or court face an unfriendly or intimidating atmosphere, typically impacting their performance. This concept of hostility extends beyond athletic competition, as several participants shared experiences of overt racism, racial stereotyping, and microaggression – at their respective institutions, within competition, and within the community.

Overt Racism in Athletic Competition

Several participants recounted memories during athletic competition where they faced overt racism and racialized experiences. For instance, both John and Lewis described being called racial slurs and being referred to as "monkeys" during away games. John explains, "At the last institution I was playing at, we were going on the road to face a school in our conference, and it was a big rivalry game. The students were in a student section calling us some monkeys." John added, "It was kind of unexpected, but when you thought about reality, it kind of, sort of was expected when you're playing in hostile territory and playing on the road against other players." Lewis shared the following:

> We've been called things on the sidelines…at certain schools that we've played against we've been called certain things. Usually, they are at away games not home games… Certain parts of the country ...you'll see a lot more people who are acting like bigoted

> racist more than other people...I'll see people treat people who are directly connected to them in a different way than, let's say Black people who are, who they don't know. And I've seen it for a long time and I just, I don't get it. That's just how they [white people] operate.

Lewis and John experienced racial hostility in certain regions of the country and against certain universities that they were competing against, which illuminates some of the racialized experiences that the participants experience while competing, and away from their campus.

Jake recounted a situation in which he witnessed racism. He recalled a teammate used a racial slur, the team took a stand by canceling their spring season in protest. While the coaches acknowledged the incident and removed the player, Jake and his teammates felt that true accountability required more than just expulsion. They believed education and deeper institutional action were necessary to address the broader cultural issues that allowed such behavior. Their decision to forgo the season reflected their commitment to challenging racism and demanding meaningful change. He shared this event:

> We canceled our whole spring season because of an incident that happened. One of my Caucasian friends had called one of my African American friends the N-word…Our team didn't like it. Our coaches was like, 'Oh no, we're going to take care of this. We got it, but he never really seen it, but we are seeing it…It's fine like just kicking him off the team, it's fine, but it's bigger than that. It's bigger than just one person saying it in the room…Our coaches listened to us and heard it, it was like, no, we were going to take care of it. It's okay. So we basically had to stand up for ourselves and we're like, we're not going to play… So we didn't do it, we didn't have a great season and we were okay with it.

Liam also recalled an unsettling experience in which a teammate was subjected to racial slurs during practice. Though the incident did not directly target him, it deeply affected him as he watched his friend struggle with the aftermath, potentially impacting his athletic opportunities. This experience reinforced Liam's determination to make the most of his own opportunities. Reflecting on the current team culture, Liam emphasized that such incidents no longer occur under the new coaching leadership. He acknowledged that while the previous incident was a result of an individual acting out of character, the current coaching staff has fostered a more disciplined, unified, and supportive environment. He particularly praised the inclusion of a former African American player who currently serves on the coaching staff, noting the positive impact of having someone who looks like him and understands his experiences. Liam's perspective highlights both the lasting emotional toll of past injustices and the progress made in ensuring an inclusive and supportive team culture. Liam shared his experience with racism:

> [long pause]I want to say [pause] I want to say yes…I had a teammate while I was on the, uh, football team with he may have been told some racial slurs towards him in practice at a point in time…and even though it wasn't said to me, or directed towards me, I kind of felt some type of way because that was not my dog you know that was my friend.

He further explained:

> It was kind of unsettling for me to go through. Even though it didn't happen to me, it was my friend. That was one of my best friends. I want everything great for him. You know, I wanted him to do those things and go play professional football and the fact that he never actually got a shot kind of hurts my feelings still, you know, to this day, and it but that's another reason why I take advantage of the opportunities I get as well by playing football in school still.

Marquis stated that he has never personally experienced or witnessed racism affecting himself or his teammates. He expressed confidence in the fairness of his coaches, believing that all athletes are given equal opportunities regardless of race. While he has not observed racial discrimination on campus or within athletics, he emphasized that if he ever did, he would not hesitate to speak up and advocate for fair treatment. His perspective highlights both his positive experience and his commitment to ensuring an inclusive and just environment for others. He shared the following:

> Yeah, I honestly haven't seen anything with me or haven't seen anything with my teammates. Or maybe you know at that with any other teammates, because like I said, like, honestly feel like I feel honestly feel like the, especially my coaches here, they get fair opportunities, no matter what skin color, who know what skin color you are, who you are, no matter, you know, what your whatever, like, you're gonna, you're gonna get treated as equal when you can get treated normal.

Thomas shared that racism has not impacted his experience at either institution he attended. He described consistently positive interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, emphasizing that he has always been treated as an equal. He expressed uncertainty about whether this was due to the school's values but affirmed that he has never personally encountered racism or prejudice. Additionally, he stated that he has not felt stereotyped as a student-athlete, highlighting his perception of an accepting and inclusive environment. Thomas shared:

> Um [Pause] no, I can't personally say racism has impacted my experience at either institution. I mean, both of them have been pretty positive interactions between whoever I meet, they all just treat you like a human. I don't know if that's because of what the beliefs are behind the school. I don't know really know. But it was just to say that I've

been like, yeah, that person is being racist or being prejudiced. I can't say that I haven't encountered that.

The participants' narratives illustrate the complexities of race-related experiences among BMSAs at HWIs. While Jake, John, Liam, and Lewis encountered or witnessed overt racism and/or took action to challenge it, Marquis and Thomas felt their institutions and their coaches provided equal opportunities and expressed not experiencing racism at their respective HWIs. These contrasting perspectives highlight the diverse realities of BMSAs navigating race, identity, and institutional culture. The next section will explore racial stereotyping and microaggressions experienced by the participants.

Everyday racial stereotyping and microaggressions

Jake stated, "Being an African-American, anywhere you go you'll always be seen as a stereotype to anything that you do." Jake shared his experiences with stereotypes and microaggressions. He recalled being judged and labeled as academically inferior. He stated:

> The world sees us as non-intelligent people. So, when African-Americans actually succeed in something like school, they look at it like, oh, there's no chance you can do that. Or, it's no way this is actually possible. You're either cheating or someone's helping you.

Jake explained that the world is representative of white people. During the interview, Jake referenced stereotypes on several occasions and when asked to further expand upon these experiences with stereotypes as a Division II student-athlete, he responded by describing his experience with racial profiling. Jake shared this:

> At my Division II institution in the Midwest region of the United States…there are not really a lot of African Americans around…Me and my friends [who were of the same

skin color] walked to the store and when we walked in the store everybody's eyes shifted to us. And they followed us around to make sure that we were not stealing anything, we're not doing what we're not supposed to. And it was just like, for what?!

In Jake's experience, he and his friends were closely watched based on presumptions that he and his friends were doing wrong. Jake compared and contrasted that scenario to another time in which he and a group of his different friends visited that same store. Here is what Jake said:

I went to the same store with a different group of friends that were not the same skin color as me. And it was nothing like that. Everybody welcomed us – Hey, how are you doing? Do you guys need help with anything? Oh, we can take you here and we can do this. There was such a different mindset. So, for one group, which is basically a whole, like six of us, that are African Americans, and they act that way, versus the other group, which was me and my…like Caucasian and Spanish friends and that's different from this situation somehow. So, you can just see how it happens. But we went down multiple times, and every time it was the same thing.

Continuing with the stories of everyday racial stereotyping and microaggressions, Lewis recounted his experiences with a faculty member who engaged in racially insensitive behaviors. He shared:

I did have this one teacher that I am not gonna say was racist, but she was kind of a [pause], she wasn't a bad lady. She was ignorant of certain things. She would ask, "Oh, can I touch your hair"? And, oh, your favorite color's purple? It's these little microaggressions. Okay, I, you're not trying to say it in a mean way but you're, she's a little bit older so that's probably what she knows.

Several of the participants experienced racial profiling and microaggressions often and in various ways. These experiences were not isolating events and brought into focus the racialized experiences the participants have with their respective institution.

Theme Summary

The racialized experiences of four of the participants reveal a complex and varied reality for BMSAs at HWIs. Jake, John, Lewis, and Liam all encountered instances of overt racism – whether on the field, in practice, or within their communities – and took steps to challenge these injustices. Jake's protest against a teammate's use of a racial slur and Liam's reflection on a past incident of racial hostility show the emotional and professional toll of these experiences, while also demonstrating the participants' resilience and desire for systemic change. In contrast, Marquis and Thomas reported positive experiences, with both feeling that their institutions treated athletes fairly and inclusively. These contrasting perspectives highlight the diversity of experiences with the BMSA community and underscore the importance of institutional support in fostering an environment. Ultimately, these narratives reveal that while progress has been made in some areas, BMSAs navigate a complex landscape shaped by racial disparities.

Chapter Five will provide a deeper analysis and summary of these findings, interpret the results, draw conclusions, and discuss implications for this study. In addition, future research directions will be discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding and draw conclusions on how race continues to impact the collegiate experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, & Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine a largely overlooked area of scholarly research – the majoritarian narratives and counter-narratives of Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) at Division II Historically White Institutions (HWIs). This study focused on how race and power dynamics shape their athletic journeys and experiences, centering their voices to illuminate both systemic inequities in collegiate athletics and the broader landscape of higher education. By bringing attention to the unique experiences of Division II BMSAs, this research sought to understand how they navigate college life, as both athletes and students, and even far more than just those two commonly associated identifiers. Guided by critical race theory, this study explored both the challenges and opportunities that define their collegiate experiences. The findings underscore the ways in which institutional structures, racialized environments, and individual and collective agency influence their academic, athletic, and social realities.

Discussion of the Findings

In alignment with the thematic analysis presented in Chapter 4, this chapter begins with a holistic interpretation directly addressing the guiding research questions:

1. How do Black male student-athletes at Division II Historically White Institutions navigate their academic and athletic experiences?
2. What challenges and opportunities shape the college experiences of Black male student-athletes at Division II Historically White Institutions?

Theme 1: Rethinking Athletic Success: Embracing Broader Paths Beyond Division I

Dominant narratives within collegiate athletics often equate success with participation in Division I, particularly in football and men's basketball, which generate significant revenue but

also reinforce broader societal inequalities (Cooper, 2012; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019). While these sports present opportunities for economic and social mobility, BMSAs rarely see direct financial benefits from their contributions and the NCAA reaping the rewards (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper, 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; Hextrum, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Even in the era of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) deals, permitting student-athletes to earn money off of their status as a student-athletes, research indicates that opportunities remain inequitable – Black athletes generally have unique experiences, perspectives, interests, needs, identities, support systems, family resources, and forms of social awareness that differ from those of most white athletes; not every athlete will be able to maximize their NIL opportunities, capitalizing on their athletic identity (Coakley et al., 2024). While the NIL landscape is still emerging, there will likely be opportunities for BMSAs to increase their personal financial gain.

The participants in this study initially aspired to compete at the Division I level, believing it to be the primary route to professional leagues or the "the pros"– the NFL or the NBA. These desires align with research indicating that sports are often perceived as a means of economic mobility in some Black communities (Bimper, 2015; Everhart & Anassi, 2017; Hextrum, 2019; Singer, 2019). However, several scholars have contested this idea of upward mobility, arguing that the systemic barriers within collegiate athletics for the Black community create a false sense of progress (Harper, 2020; Hawkins, 2013). Hawkins (2013) described this as a "Plantation Model" where HEIs profit from the labor of BMSAs while offering limited long-term benefits. Systemic racism limits true upward mobility for BMSAs at HWIs, reinforcing inequities (Bell, 1995; Feagin, 2020). Cooper (2018) advocated for the holistic development of BMSAs to counteract the "sports-only" mentality that limits long-term career prospects and mobility. Huma

et al. (2020) supported this argument, highlighting how the NCAA structure furthers economic disparities for BMSAs, inhibiting opportunities to attain generational wealth.

Participant responses reflect these scholarly critiques. Jake, for example, confirmed that there is an allure of going to Division I for the opportunity to support their family and go professional in their sport. However, he and others argued that Division II provided an alternative pathway, allowing them to continue competing at a high level while also pursuing their professional dreams and engaging in the sport they love. Although Marquis initially desired to attend a Division I institution, he shared that he simply wanted to play somewhere, and the coaches at the Division II institution were willing to give him an opportunity to play and develop academically, reshaping his perception of success. Lewis, on the other hand, expressed disdain for Division I, equating it to a job rather than a passion, reinforcing scholars' arguments that the commercialization of collegiate sports fosters a high-stakes, profit-driven environment where winning takes precedence. This "win-at-all-costs" mentality pushes athletes toward elite programs with proven success, as these institutions provide the highest visibility and the strongest pathways to professional opportunities (Childs, 2021; Collins, 2017; Shropshire & Williams, 2017; Singer, 2019).

By participating in Division II athletics, the study's participants discovered broader definitions of success that extended beyond professional sports, challenging the dominant narrative that equates achievement solely with Division I participation. They found Division II to be a space that provided resources, academic support, and mentorship conducive to academic and career development. Some participants noted a personal connection to Division II that not only contributed to their athletic development but also set them up for success beyond sports – specifically, Division II provided valuable tools and opportunities that helped them achieve both

their educational and professional goals. Their experiences reinforce the idea that collegiate success – both academically and athletically – can be redefined by the unique opportunities Division II offers. Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts that racism is embedded within social structures, shaping access to opportunities in collegiate athletics (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Within this framework, Division I HWIs are often positioned as the pinnacle of success, reinforcing the belief that only elite institutions provide meaningful academic and athletic opportunities. However, the participants' experiences challenge this assumption, revealing Division II as a legitimate and valuable space for BMSAs' success.

Moreover, participants' perspectives resist racialized narratives that confine BMSAs to narrow athletic roles. Their success was not solely defined by professional aspirations but also by academic achievement, career readiness, and personal growth. Their time and experience at the Division II level demonstrates a broader, more inclusive understanding of success, resisting the majoritarian narrative that restricts opportunities to a select few institutions.

CRT emphasizes the power of lived experience as a form of knowledge. The participants' reflections illustrate how Division II provided meaningful athletic, academic, and professional opportunities. Their success — both in professional leagues and beyond sports — demonstrates that institutional prestige is not the sole determinant of achievement. Instead, it is the support, resources, and environment available to BMSAs that shape their paths.

This study highlights that success is not monolithic. It is not solely about reaching professional leagues, but also about academic achievement, career readiness, and personal growth. These insights challenge racialized expectations that confine BMSAs to limited athletic roles, aligning with CRT's tenet of exposing and dismantling structures that limit or hinder Black student-athletes' potential.

The NCAA's Division II's "Make It Yours" statement emphasizes the value and importance of building a well-rounded student-athlete experience that extends beyond competition, reinforcing the importance of holistic development. By presenting counter-narratives that validate Division II as a meaningful space for success, these findings challenge the structural inequities embedded in collegiate athletics. The participants' voices serve as powerful testaments to the idea that opportunity, support, and success are not confined to Division I. Alternative pathways deserve recognition and validation – a central tenet of both CRT and counter-narrative methodology.

Theme 2: Division II as a Supportive Family

The NCAA emphasizes a well-rounded Division II experience, advocating for a "balanced" approach that enables student-athletes to excel athletically, academically, and within their communities (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.). Scholars agree that true success in college athletics extends beyond performance on the field or court, requiring academic and personal development (Shropshire & Williams, 2017). However, research also indicates that existing systems often fall short in adequately preparing BMSAs, particularly those in Division I, for the academic challenges and expectations of college, hindering their path to degree attainment (Bimper, 2012; Bimper, 2015; Hawkins, 2013; Hodge, 2015). AT HWIs, BMSAs, particularly football players, are often perceived as athletes first, and students second, reinforcing the notion that their primary value lies in sports rather than academics (Bimper, 2015; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Additionally, many BMSAs at HWIs experience social isolation and struggle to integrate into the campus community (Melendez, 2008; Singer, 2019). Both Melendez (2008) and Bimper (2015) highlighted the difficulty BMSAs face in balancing the demands of their sport with academic responsibilities, often feeling pressure from coaches. The absence of Black

leadership and mentorship further intensifies their sense of isolation, limiting support systems necessary and crucial for their holistic development as student-athletes (Hawkins et al. 2017; Shropshire & Williams, 2017).

The participants' experiences suggest that community, family, and institutional support are important in shaping their collegiate experiences. They valued academic and career preparation within a family-like environment, where strong mentorship and holistic guidance from coaches and administrators helped counteract the racial and cultural isolation often associated with HWIs. Many described their Division II experience as creating a sense of belonging, with some likening it to a "home away from home."

These reflections align with research on HBCUs, which have historically provided culturally empowering environments for BMSAs. HBCUs offer supportive academic and social spaces, culturally relevant curricula, and Black leadership and mentorship, fostering identity development and holistic growth. While HWIs often lack these culturally affirming structures — leading to social isolation for BMSAs—the participants' experiences challenge the notion that only HBCUs can provide a strong sense of belonging. Their perspectives suggest that Division II HWIs, when intentional about mentorship and holistic support, can create affirming environments that foster both academic and athletic success for BMSAs, counteracting the dominant narrative that positions HWIs as inherently isolating spaces for Black student-athletes.

Utilizing CRT and counter-narratives, this study challenges dominant ideologies that position Division I athletics as the ideal or only viable pathway for Black male student-athletes (BMSAs). These dominant narratives reinforce systemic barriers at HWIs, where racialized structures often prioritize BMSAs as athletes first and students second, often limiting their academic development and sense of belonging in higher education (Bimper, 2015; Hawkins,

2013). However, the experiences shared by participants disrupt this majoritarian narrative by offering counter-narratives that affirm Division II as a legitimate space where BMSAs can thrive academically, athletically, and personally.

These findings reflect a core tenet of CRT: the critique of dominant power structures that shape inequities in collegiate athletics. Research has consistently shown that Division I HWIs often fail to provide the academic preparation, cultural affirmation, and holistic development necessary for BMSAs' success (Bimper, 2012; Melendez, 2008; Singer, 2019). Participants' experiences reinforce this critique, highlighting how Division II institutions provided stronger support networks — through mentorship, community, and institutional investment — that counteracted the racial and cultural isolation typically associated with HWIs. This directly challenges the assumption that only Division I, or even only HBCUs, can provide meaningful and affirming experiences for BMSAs.

Additionally, the participants' reflections mirror research on HBCUs (Cooper, 2013), where culturally empowering environments foster a sense of belonging and identity affirmation for Black student-athletes. While HBCUs have historically provided this space, the findings suggest that Division II HWIs, when intentional about mentorship and holistic development, can also cultivate similar experiences. This presents a counternarrative that disrupts majoritarian assumptions — specifically, the notion that HWIs cannot offer culturally affirming spaces for BMSAs. Participants' descriptions of Division II as a "home away from home" and a "family-like" environment exemplify CRT's emphasis on the power of lived experience as a counter to dominant racial narratives.

Moreover, the absence of Black leadership and culturally relevant mentorship at HWIs reinforces structural inequities, yet the participants' experiences reveal that Division II programs

with strong mentorship structures can mitigate these challenges. This aligns with CRT's commitment to both exposing systemic barriers and highlighting alternative models of success for marginalized groups. The Make It Yours initiative in Division II reflects this effort by promoting a balanced student-athlete experience that emphasizes both academic and athletic success — directly opposing the exploitative nature of Division I's commercialized sports model (Shropshire & Williams, 2017).

By elevating counter-narratives that validate Division II as a legitimate and supportive space for BMSAs, these findings further reinforce CRT's critique of racialized power structures in collegiate athletics. The participants' stories challenge the prevailing belief that only Division I or HBCUs can provide meaningful experiences for Black student-athletes, illustrating that under the right conditions, Division II HWIs can foster a sense of belonging, mentorship, and academic success. This directly counters the deficit-based narratives that position BMSAs as athletes first and students second, emphasizing instead the value of holistic development and community support in shaping their collegiate experiences.

Theme 3: Sports Don't Last Forever, Develop a Plan and Find Success

As collegiate athletics have evolved into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, universities increasingly prioritize athletic success over academic development, driven by lucrative media rights, corporate sponsorships, and donor contributions (Bimper, 2012; Hawkins et al. 2017; Singer, 2019). Within this commercialized framework, BMSAs are often commodified for their athletic prowess while their academic potential is overlooked, reinforcing systemic disparities in higher education (Hextrum, 2019; Hodge, 2015). Unlike Division I, where athletics operate as a major revenue driver, Division II follows a partial-scholarship model with athletic budgets embedded within overall university funding. This financial structure prioritizes a more integrated

approach, emphasizing a balance between academic success and athletic participation. With fewer commercial pressures and financial incentives dictating the athletic experience, Division II fosters an environment that encourages student-athletes to develop holistically, preparing them for long-term success beyond their sport.

The NCAA asserts that part of its mission is to prepare student-athletes for life within and after college (Overview, n.d.). The participants in my study recognized that sports will come to an end, and the chances of reaching the professional level were slim. This realization is supported by the NCAA and multiple scholars who focus on BMSA post-collegiate success and revealed that there were approximately 19,000 draft eligible student-athletes in the sport of men's basketball; however, only 1.1 percent of those athletes went to a major professional organization. In football, the odds are slightly better, with roughly 1.5 percent of 77,000 participants being drafted professionally. Scholars argue that the mystique of professional sports often creates a narrative that sports could be a lottery, instantly changing the financial status of the athletes and their families (Bimper, 2020; Eitzen, 2001; Everhart & Anassi, 2017; Singer, 2019).

The participants acknowledged the reality of finite athletic careers and emphasized the importance of long-term career aspirations beyond professional sports. They highlighted the necessity of a backup plan. Their perspectives reflect a shift from pursuing professional sports to leveraging their education for future success. Bimper's (2012) research on BMSAs' academic development at the Division I level underscores the importance of identifying and learning from academically successful student-athletes. The participants emphasized strategic planning, perseverance, leveraging support systems, and fostering relationships as critical factors for

BMSA success. Many expressed a desire to serve as role models for future BMSAs, with others stressing authenticity and mentorship being key proponents for success. Their perspectives align with existing research on mentorship and support networks, reinforcing the significance of guiding future generations of BMSAs toward academic and professional success.

The NCAA emphasizes that a fundamental element of success in college for student-athletes stems from student-athletes succeeding and winning in multiple areas (Overview, n.d.). However, scholars argue that the systems are designed to adequately prepare BMSAs for post-collegiate life beyond their sport (Bimper, 2012; Bimper, 2015; Hawkins et al. 2017; Hodge, 2015; Meekins, 2018; Singer, 2019). To uphold its mission of preparing student-athletes to learn, compete, and grow both on and off the field (Our Division II Priorities, n.d.), it is crucial to examine the Division II BMSA experience and identify pathways to academic, athletic, and long-term success. This study explores these factors, acknowledging that 98 percent of collegiate football and men's basketball players will ultimately pursue careers outside of professional sports (NCAA Recruiting Facts, 2025; Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Understanding how HWIs cultivate environments that prepare Division II BMSAs for success beyond athletics — both academically and professionally — is essential. All the participants acknowledged the inevitable conclusion of their athletic careers, sharing insights from their academic and athletic journeys. The majoritarian narrative suggests that BMSAs should prioritize professional sports over academics, reinforcing systemic barriers that hinder BMSAs' long-term success beyond athletics. However, the participants' experiences serve as powerful counter-narratives, demonstrating their intentional efforts to build careers outside of sports.

CRT underscores lived experience as a vital source of knowledge, and the participants' commitment to redefining success for future BMSAs disrupts prevalent stereotypes. The

participants' emphasis on mentorship, support networks, and perseverance directly confronts the systemic shortcomings of college athletics, which often neglects to prepare BMSAs for post-athletic careers (Bimper, 2012; Bimper, 2015; Singer, 2019). While traditional narratives position professional athletes as the primary role models for BMSAs, these participants advocate for a broader, more empowering vision—one where academic achievement, career preparation, and leadership define success. By resisting majoritarian narratives and reshaping perceptions, BMSA's stories highlight the transformative potential of counter-narratives in fostering a more equitable and holistic model of success for BMSAs at HWIs.

Theme 4: Navigating Hostile Territory at Historically White Institutions

Scholars argue that racism against BMSAs persists across sports, higher education, media, and society, deeply embedded within various societal structures (Bell, 1995: Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper, 2019; Hawkins et al. 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Singer, 2019). BMSAs frequently endure mischaracterizations, stereotypes, and discrimination that shape their academic and athletic experiences (Harper, 2019; Hawkins et al. 2017; Singer, 2019). Within Division I athletics, BMSAs are often idolized for their athletic abilities while their academic potential is overlooked (Meekins, 2017). Additionally, research indicates that BMSAs at Division I institutions face prejudice from white students, faculty, and non-athletic minority students (Bimper, 2015; Harper, 2018; Hawkins et al. 2017; Henderson, 2017; Hodge, 2015; Melendez, 2008).

The majority of the participants in this study reported experiencing racism, while a few stated they had not experienced racism. This contrast complicates existing literature emphasizing the pervasiveness of racism in collegiate athletics and of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Feagin, 2006; Johnson & Jackson, 2017). Research suggests that BMSAs at HWIs navigate

unique challenges shaped by their intersecting identities (Harper, 2016; Martin et al., 2010; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2019). Many participants described confronting the stereotype that BMSAs lack intelligence and only succeed through external assistance or dishonesty – an assertion supported by prior studies on BMSAs' experiences (Bimper, 2015; Harper, 2018; Hawkins et al. 2017; Henderson, 201; Hodge, 2015; Melendez, 2008). These findings reinforce the need to critically examine the varied experiences of BMSAs and the structural inequalities that shape their realities. Martin et al. (2010) and Oseguera (2010) suggest that stereotypes not only distort public perceptions but also undermine the academic potential of student-athletes, reinforcing biases that diminish their classroom performance. Such microaggressions, while subtle, contribute to the broader systemic racism entrenched in higher education. (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Some participants shared firsthand experiences of racial hostility. Liam recounted an incident in which a Black teammate was subjected to racial slurs during a team practice, further underscoring the persistence of racial hostility in both academic and athletic settings. Lewis described encounters with a professor who exhibited racial microaggressions, reinforcing how even subtle biases can have harmful effects on students' academic experiences. Similarly, John described being racially profiled in a store in the Midwest, demonstrating how systemic racism extends beyond campus into everyday life.

Despite these experiences, the NCAA mandates that collegiate athletic programs operate with integrity while fostering diversity and inclusion. However, reality does not always align with these principles. In contrast to prevailing research, Marquis and Thomas reported not encountering racism. They described their team environment as fair, inclusive, and equitable, with student-athletes receiving equal treatment and respect, regardless of race. Their perspectives challenge dominant narratives about race relations in collegiate athletics, suggesting that some

athletic programs may cultivate more inclusive cultures than others. These insights highlight the need for further exploration of the factors that contribute to the more equitable environments within HWIs.

Critical Race Theory asserts that racism is embedded in the fabric of social structures and that Black individuals are subjected to both overt and subtle forms of racial discrimination in daily interactions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Participants' experiences, such as Lewis's encounters with microaggressions and John's racial profiling – illustrated and exposed that racism is not merely an individual problem that manifests in everyday interactions, but a systemic issue permeating multiple aspects of life, including education, athletics, and broader society. CRT illuminates and emphasizes the significance of lived experiences of marginalized groups in understanding and challenging racial inequalities, and the participants' narratives offer valuable counter-narratives that disrupt the often sanitized portrayals of race and inclusion in higher education and sports.

Moreover, CRT underscores the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that race, class, and other social identities intersect to shape individuals' experiences. The racialized challenges participants faced in both academic and athletic spaces reveal the broader societal structures that perpetuate inequalities, reinforcing CRT's call for systemic change. By providing counter-narratives that highlight personal encounters with racism and microaggressions, this study challenges the majoritarian narrative that often overlooks and minimizes these issues. Participants' stories serve as powerful testaments to the persistent nature of racism and the ongoing need for a critical examination and intervention in all spheres of life.

The four themes explored in this study illustrate the complex, racialized realities that BMSAs navigate at Division II HWIs. Their counter-narratives challenge dominant perceptions

of BMSAs as singularly focused on athletic success and instead highlight their agency in reclaiming their own stories, their commitment to academic and career advancement, and their resilience in overcoming systemic barriers that seek to confine their identities to athletics.

Implications

This study reveals that success for Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) is not confined to Division I athletics or the pursuit of professional sports. Instead, participants' experiences at Division II Historically White Institutions (HWIs) illuminate alternative and affirming pathways to achievement — both academic and personal — that challenge dominant narratives equating success with prestige and profit-driven athletic models. Rooted in a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, these findings expose the racialized structures embedded in collegiate sports and resist the commodification of Black athletic labor. The participants' reflections serve as powerful counter-narratives that reject the "athlete-first" stereotype, illustrating how Division II institutions, when equipped with intentional support systems, mentorship, and a commitment to holistic development, can foster meaningful student-athlete experiences.

In Theme 1, participants initially aspired to Division I athletics, mirroring broader societal messages within some Black communities that frame sports as a primary avenue for social mobility. However, their eventual embrace of Division II athletics reveals a broader, more inclusive understanding of success. Division II provided access to mentorship, academic resources, and personal growth opportunities often absent in Division I environments that prioritize revenue generation over individual well-being. These experiences disrupted the exploitative "Plantation Model" of college sports and validated the importance of institutional environments that center on student-athletes' full identities. For example, participants like Jake and Marquis described a shift in their perceptions of success after receiving support at the

Division II level, while Lewis outright rejected Division I as a passionless, profit-oriented system. Their experiences affirm CRT's focus on dismantling racialized ideologies and uplifting the lived realities of marginalized individuals.

Theme 2 further underscores the significance of Division II programs as supportive, family-like environments that resist the cultural isolation typically experienced by BMSAs at HWIs. Contrary to the belief that only HBCUs can offer affirming collegiate experiences, participants consistently described their institutions as "homes away from home," citing strong mentorship, community, and academic guidance as central to their success. These narratives disrupt dominant frameworks that situate BMSAs as mere athletic commodities and instead position them as whole individuals capable of academic excellence and identity development. Even in the absence of widespread Black leadership, the intentional presence of care and mentorship helped participants feel seen, supported, and empowered to succeed in all aspects of collegiate life.

Together, these themes reveal how BMSAs at Division II HWIs navigate and resist dominant structures within collegiate athletics. Their stories function as CRT-informed counter-narratives that not only challenge racialized assumptions but also reframe what it means to thrive in higher education. Rather than prescribing solutions from a practitioner's standpoint, this study draws its implications directly from participants' lived experiences. The findings illuminate how institutional prestige does not inherently determine the value of a student-athlete's journey. Instead, it is the presence of equitable support systems, affirming relationships, and a commitment to holistic success that enables BMSAs to flourish—both on the field and beyond it. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to dismantle racial hierarchies in

collegiate sports and affirms that success is not monolithic but multidimensional, diverse, and deeply personal.

The implications drawn from Theme 3: Sports Don't Last Forever; Develop a Plan and Find Success speak directly to the systemic and ideological structures that shape the collegiate athletic experience for Black male student-athletes (BMSAs) at Division II Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Participants' acknowledgment of the improbability of professional athletic careers challenges the dominant, majoritarian narrative that positions sports as the primary — if not sole — avenue for Black men to achieve upward mobility. This myth, perpetuated through media, educational systems, and athletic institutions, often sidelines academic development in favor of athletic commodification. However, the participants in this study articulated a nuanced understanding of their futures, emphasizing the importance of education, mentorship, long-term planning, and career preparation. Their perspectives not only counter deficit-based stereotypes but also serve as powerful counter-narratives that resist the limiting frameworks imposed by structurally racialized systems. By centering education and career aspirations, these BMSAs redefine success in holistic terms, reframing their identities beyond athletics. This shift in narrative highlights the need for institutions to move beyond performative support and toward structural reforms that genuinely align with the NCAA's mission to prepare student-athletes for life after college. Critical Race Theory (CRT) underscores the importance of these lived experiences in illuminating how existing systems fall short and what is required to cultivate equitable outcomes. The participants' agency, strategic planning, and leadership aspirations disrupt the status quo and call for a reimagining of institutional priorities to foster sustainable, long-term success for BMSAs beyond sport.

In Theme 4: Navigating Hostile Territory at Historically White Institutions, the implications extend into the broader racialized landscape of higher education, where BMSAs must contend with systemic racism embedded in both academic and athletic contexts. While some participants shared that they had not experienced racism directly, the majority recounted incidents of racial microaggressions, stereotyping, and overt hostility — confirming what CRT identifies as the pervasive and normalized nature of racism in institutional spaces. These experiences expose the disjuncture between the NCAA's stated commitment to diversity and inclusion and the lived realities of BMSAs who often feel marginalized, surveilled, or misunderstood. The structural inequalities revealed in these narratives illustrate how racism is not simply interpersonal but deeply woven into the policies, practices, and cultural climate of HWIs. From being profiled in classrooms to hearing racial slurs in athletic settings, participants' testimonies highlight the enduring impact of racialization on their sense of belonging, identity formation, and academic engagement. Simultaneously, these stories act as counter-narratives that disrupt sanitized portrayals of race relations in college athletics. They affirm CRT's emphasis on intersectionality, revealing how race, athletics, and education interact to shape the complex, and often hostile, environments BMSAs navigate. The fact that some participants did describe inclusive, equitable environments points to the possibility of institutional change — but also underscores the inconsistency of these experiences across contexts. Ultimately, these findings implicate collegiate institutions in perpetuating or disrupting systemic racism and call for a reexamination of how BMSAs are supported — or not — within predominantly white educational and athletic structures.

Theoretical and Methodological Implications

CRT scholars have extensively documented the pervasive and systemic challenges Black student athletes face at Division I HWIs (Bimper et al., 2012; Bimper, 2015; Brown, 2017; Comeaux & Fuentes; 2015; Cooper, 2012; Feagin, 2006; Harper, 2016; Hawkins, 2017; Hodge, 2015; Melendez, 2008; Oseguera, 2010; Singer, 2019). The studies reveal that BMSAs at NCAA Division I institutions often feel disenfranchised (Bimper, 2015; Johnson & Jackson, 2017), negatively characterized in media (Oseguera, 2010), and unsupported (Singer, 2019). However, research on BMSAs in Division II remains limited. To truly uphold its commitment to diversity and inclusion, Division II must ensure that BMSAs receive the academic, social, and professional support necessary to thrive within and beyond their collegiate careers. This study employed CRT and CRM to examine how BMSAs navigate their athletic and academic experiences at HWI Division II institutions and how race shapes these experiences. CRT provided a lens to explore their narratives, highlighting the ways in which systemic racism influences BMSAs' educational and athletic trajectories while illuminating their stories. The interview protocol questions generated memories of their experiences as NCAA Division II BMSAs, which paved the way for creating relevant and compelling themes.

One of the key tenets of CRT, counter-storytelling, was central to this study. This method amplifies the voices, perspectives, and lived realities of marginalized individuals, challenging dominant narratives that shape American society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The counter-stories in this study detail racial microaggressions, such as being followed in stores, as well as overt discrimination, such as exclusion from opportunities and racial slurs at games. While four participants reported experiencing racism, two did not, offering a nuanced perspective. This contrasts the Pew Research Center data (Cox, 2024), which suggests that approximately 75% of

Black adults experience some form of racial discrimination either regularly (13%) or from time to time (62%). Additionally, several scholars assert the normality and permanence of racism in their studies related to BMSAs (Bimper, 2012; Harper, 2016; Singer, 2019).

This study also supports the CRT tenet of interest convergence, which suggests that benefits for African Americans are often granted when they align with white interests. (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Participants in the study talked about the allure of playing NCAA Division 1 sports. The hopes of elevating their socioeconomic status, supporting their family, playing ball on a national stage, earning a degree, and positioning themselves to go professional in their sport were all motivating reasons for playing their sport. Based on existing research studies, BMSAs that are recruited to and participate at HWIs serve a purpose in helping the institution bring in revenue (Rhoden, 2006). In a highly commercialized market, NCAA Division 1 football and men's basketball yields billions of dollars for the NCAA and millions of dollars for their respective institutions (Singer, 2019). Murty et al. (2014) assert several Black Division 1 college football players identify as coming from low socio-economic families. Scholars assert that universities offer athletics scholarships for student-athletes to improve their enrollment, revenue, and athletics programs. In return BMSAs receive an opportunity to play their sport, receive a scholarship, and get the opportunity to compete on a national stage (Satterfield & Croft, 2015; Bennett et al., 2015). This example exemplifies interest convergence, where universities benefit while fulfilling recruitment goals.

CRT acknowledges systemic racism as the primary driver of racial inequality (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Racism is embedded in societal structures, including sports and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate,1995). Jake's experience of being followed in a store with Black friends but not with white friends underscores this

embedded racism. Participants also recounted experiencing racial slurs at away games and microaggression from faculty. These accounts align with CRT scholarship on the normalization and permanence of racism in education and athletics (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Future research should continue to explore these issues and advocate for policies that promote equity.

Limitations

While this study offers rich insight into the lived experiences of BMSAs at NCAA Division II HWIs, several limitations should be acknowledged, particularly in the context of the CRT and CRM informed design. First, my positionality as a researcher — particularly since I share racial, cultural, or experiential proximity to participants — may be viewed by some as introducing bias. However, from a CRT perspective, this proximity enhances, rather than detracts from, the research, allowing for deeper trust, shared understanding, and culturally grounded interpretation. Still, I recognize that readers grounded in more traditional paradigms may perceive this as a limitation. Second, CRT remains a politically charged and sometimes contested framework, particularly in education and sport contexts. The explicit focus on systemic racism, whiteness, and structural inequity may not be universally accepted in all academic or institutional spaces, which impacts how the research is received or supported. Additionally, counter-narratives, while powerful in challenging dominant ideologies, are inherently subjective. Their strength lies in the authenticity of lived experience, not in external validation. This may be viewed as a limitation by scholars seeking empirically verifiable or replicable data. Finally, the layered and intersectional nature of the participants' experiences made thematic analysis complex. While care was taken to honor each voice, there is always a risk that broad themes may

oversimplify or unintentionally flatten individual nuance. Despite the use of rigorous strategies such as reflexivity and audit trails, some depth may inevitably be lost in the synthesis process.

However, this study was intentionally designed to explore the experiences of BMSAs within a specific context, and the findings should not be generalized to all universities. Notably, the perspectives of BMSAs at other small college athletic institutions (e.g., Division III, National Junior College Athletic Association [NJCAA], National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics [NAIA]) are not represented, limiting the broader applicability of the study's implications. Time constraints also imposed another limitation: each participant was interviewed only once, and all interviews were conducted virtually. As a result, responses may have been influenced by participants' immediate moods or external circumstances at the time of the interview. Additionally, despite efforts to mitigate research effects, my positionality may have influenced participant responses, introducing the possibility of unintended bias.

A final limitation is that all participants in this study were Black males competing in either football or men's basketball. Since all participants were BMSAs in these sports, the study does not account for the experiences of BMSAs in other sports (e.g., track and field, golf, wrestling) or of student-athletes from other marginalized backgrounds (e.g., Black women, Latinx student-athletes). This means the findings do not reflect the full spectrum of minoritized student-athlete experiences, further limiting the study's scope, highlighting the need for future research to explore a broader range of identities and sports.

Future Research Directions

Future research should examine how NCAA Division II BMSAs perceive career acquisition after earning their baccalaureate degrees. Understanding these perceptions would provide insight into the motivating factors that drive BMSA persistence and graduation beyond

their athletic commitments. Scholars have extensively documented how NCAA Division I BMSAs are stereotyped as dumb jocks who are not serious about academics or degree completion (Bimper, 2015; Oseguera, 2010; Shropshire & Collins, 2017). However, significantly less is known about NCAA Division II BMSAs, particularly regarding their academic motivations and post-graduation aspirations at HWIs (Lehman, 2020). Addressing this gap would challenge prevailing assumptions and provide counter-narratives to these stereotypes or majoritarian stories. A qualitative phenomenological study would be an appropriate methodological approach, allowing for in-depth exploration of BMSAs' lived experiences through participant interviews.

Another critical area for future research is the experiences of Black female student-athletes (BFSAs) at HWIs. Bernhard (2014) found that BFSAs at Division I HWIs perceived a lack of institutional commitment to diversity, as evidenced by the scarcity of Black coaches, administrators, and support staff in athletic departments. Participants in that study expressed that a stronger representation of administrators of color would positively impact BFSAs' retention and overall collegiate experience. Moreover, the absence of institutional support contributed to feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement among BFSAs (Bernhard, 2014). Bernhard (2014) argues that male sports are often prioritized over female sports, leading to a lack of recognition and respect for BFSAs as athletes. In addition to gender disparities, BFSAs are subjected to racialized stereotypes that perpetuate negative characterizations, such as the "mammy," "Jezebel," and "welfare queen" tropes (Bruening et al., 2005). Given the unique intersectional challenges BFSAs encounter, further research is essential to fill this overlooked area of research and amplify their voices as valuable contributors to academic discourse. This study will offer deeper insight into how to effectively support these student-athletes across academic, athletic,

and social domains. Qualitative narrative analysis would be a suitable approach, allowing BFSAs to share their stories and highlight the complexities of their lived experiences at HWIs.

My study focused on the athletic, academic, and racialized experiences of six BMSAs at Division II HWIs, revealing that while Division II institutions provide critical opportunities for support and community, participants still encountered racism both on campus and during away games. While existing research has explored these experiences at the NCAA Division I level, this study contributes to the limited scholarship on Division II BMSAs at HWIs. However, a notable gap remains regarding the experiences of Division II BMSAs at HBCUs. Cooper's (2013) research found that HBCUs foster a unique cultural environment where institutional values align with Black male student-athletes' socialization processes, ultimately facilitating positive educational experiences. Unlike HWIs, HBCUs are mission-driven institutions that prioritize the holistic development of Black students, creating an environment that fosters academic success, cultural empowerment, and community support (Allen et al., 2007; Cooper, 2013).

Furthermore, HBCUs are characterized by a strong representation of Black faculty, administrators, and staff, which plays a crucial role in fostering positive academic and psychosocial outcomes for Black students (Cooper, 2013). These institutions also provide quality educational opportunities for students from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, including first-generation college students and those from under-resourced secondary schools (Cooper, 2013). Given the distinct sociocultural and educational missions of HBCUs, more research is needed to explore how these institutions support BMSAs at the Division II and NAIA levels within HBCUs. A qualitative case study would be an effective methodological approach, enabling an in-depth examination of BMSAs' lived experiences at HBCUs and offering a

comparative perspective on the support structures available at HBCUs versus HWIs for BMSAs. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of BMSAs and BFSAs across institutional contexts, ultimately informing policies and practices that enhance student-athlete development at all levels of collegiate athletics.

Conclusion

As outlined in the implications section, this study directly addresses research questions that contribute to the fields of athletic and academic services, as well as student-athlete development within NCAA Division II HWIs. By integrating both theoretical and practical applications, this research provides valuable insights that can inform institutional policies and practices aimed at supporting BMSAs.

A key strength of this study lies in its ability to highlight disparities between BMSAs and their white counterparts on campus. By shedding light on these inequities, this research underscores the need for targeted resources and institutional support to enhance BMSA persistence and overall success. The NCAA already has development programs in place that aim to enhance the student-athlete's growth in personal and professional development, but it's not geared toward the holistic development of BMSAs. The NCAA has programs like the Career in Sports Forum, which is an annual educational program that brings together 200 selected NCAA student-athletes to learn about and explore potential careers in sports, particularly college athletics. In addition, it has the Student-Athlete Leadership Forum, which engages a diverse representation of student-athletes, faculty, and administrators. The NCAA also provides awards and scholarships that recognize student-athletes' athletic, academic, and community-based achievements, but more attention needs to be placed on mechanisms that support BMSAs. The

NCAA provides holistic development through their awards and leadership development programs. The organization also highlights its' mission of inclusivity for student-athletes, but yet, the findings in my study reveals BMSAs at Division II HWIs still face systemic inequities that challenge their holistic development and experiences.

Furthermore, the study's methodological rigor strengthens its impact. Each interview was conducted virtually and analyzed through both thematic and narrative analysis, ensuring that BMSAs' lived experiences were authentically captured and contextualized. This approach not only amplified their voices — voices that are often unheard — but also provided a nuanced interpretation of their realities.

Grounded in CRT, this study affirmed the importance of centering marginalized voices and recognizing their narratives as legitimate knowledge. Additionally, my positionality as both a scholar and practitioner in collegiate athletics — with firsthand experience as a BMSA in football — enhanced the study's depth and credibility. With over two decades of experience in athletic academic services and student-athlete development, I was uniquely positioned to interpret the findings with both academic insight and real-world understanding.

The findings of this study revealed several key takeaways: (1) sports serve as a crucial motivational tool for BMSAs, helping them pursue academic and athletic aspirations while seeking socioeconomic mobility; (2) Division II BMSAs perceive their institutions as fostering a more family-like atmosphere compared to the corporate-driven model of Division I athletics; (3) despite systemic challenges, BMSAs emphasized the necessity of strategic planning to ensure their success; and (4) racism remains a deeply embedded, systemic issue that continues to shape the intercollegiate athletic experience.

Looking beyond the findings of this study, I can imagine a future that boldly builds champions and redefines the collegiate athletic experience for BMSAs—a future rooted in academic excellence, athletic prowess, and personal growth. My vision is not merely incremental; it is transformative. It calls on institutions of higher education and the NCAA to shift the culture, structures, and expectations of college sports to build champions on and off the field or court.

Central to this reimagined future is the Scholar-Baller concept, which challenges the outdated narrative that athletic and academic excellence are mutually exclusive (Harrison, 2007). Imagine a helmet sticker or a patch on a letterman's jacket that celebrates a 4.0 GPA as fiercely as a game-winning touchdown. This simple yet powerful imagery can help flip the script on what it means to be a successful student-athlete, especially for Black males who often bear the weight of limiting stereotypes. Imagery matters—when young Black men consistently see themselves reflected only in athletic glory, it narrows their dreams. When they see Black excellence on national platforms for academic, civic, and entrepreneurial achievements, it expands what's possible.

But vision must be matched with action. Institutions must commit to hiring more Black faculty and staff across academic and athletic departments—not just as diversity checkboxes but as mentors, advisors, and models of excellence who can offer culturally relevant guidance. Their presence on campus sends a message of belonging and that one's whole self is valued. Creating intentional spaces of belonging — be they cultural lounges, leadership retreats, or affinity-based mentoring groups — fosters the sense of community that BMSAs so often seek and deserve at HWIs.

Equally vital is the implementation of robust mentorship and leadership development programs specifically designed for BMSAs. These initiatives should be grounded in cultural understanding, led by both peers and professionals who reflect the students' lived realities, and embedded into the athletic and academic experience. Such programs must prioritize holistic development, preparing BMSAs not just for the next game, but for graduation, for careers, and for life.

Coaches, too, have a crucial role. The culture of "we're all in this together" must be more than a slogan. Coaches should be trained not only in Xs and Os but also in inclusive leadership, emotional intelligence, and culturally responsive practices. They are often the most consistent adult figures in a student-athlete's college journey — and they can be either gatekeepers or door-openers.

Athletic Directors must also re-evaluate their positionality. This requires unprovoked, unprompted leadership — a willingness to engage in hard conversations and make bold changes without needing a scandal or national spotlight to spark action. Change should be intentional, proactive, and driven by a commitment to equity.

From the NCAA perspective, enhancing platforms like the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) is essential. SAAC gives student-athletes a voice, and in a bold future, it must become a space where BMSAs are not only included but amplified. SAAC at the national and campus levels should ensure that at least two members from each team are involved, creating more diverse and representative spaces. SAAC can become a vehicle for systemic advocacy, peer leadership, and the elevation of student-athlete perspectives, especially for BMSAs. This platform allows them the opportunity to amplify their voices in ways that they deem necessary for enhancing their experiences.

Ultimately, this vision calls for courage — a willingness to dream big. It calls for higher education institutions and athletic organizations to view BMSAs not as liabilities to manage or commodities to exploit, but as leaders in the making. The transformation I envision will not happen overnight, but it must begin with us: with researchers, educators, administrators, coaches, and student-athletes themselves. Together, we can redefine what success looks like and build a future in which every BMSA is empowered to become not just a player — but a scholar, a leader, and a legacy.

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Appendix A: Flyer for Recruitment



Appendix B: Interview Protocol for IRB

Make-It-Yours: Black Male Student-Athletes Recount Their Division II Experiences

Interview Protocol

Overview

- Greetings and thank you to the participant. Light conversation. Remind them of confidentiality.
- Read verbal consent script.

Interview Questions

1. Why did you want to go to a Division II University?
2. What does it mean to you to be a Division II "student-athlete"?
3. If you're picking over again, would you pick the same college? Why or why not?
4. How has the pandemic impacted your collegiate experience?
5. Has your image/identity as a Black man influenced your Division II student-athlete experience? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. Were you involved in any activism for racial justice? If so, what inspired you? In not, why not?
7. Were you aware of activism happening on campus? If so, please explain.
    a. In the athletics department? If so, please explain.
8. Has there ever been a time when you felt that racism impacted your experience at your institution? If so, how? If not, why not?
9. What advice would you give to BMSAs contemplating attending your institution?
10. What stories do you want the world to know about you (as a BMSA)?
11. Is there anything that you would like to share about your experience as a BMSA that I did not ask about?

Closing

Now that we are done, do you have any questions you would like to ask me about this research project? [Pause] If you want to contact me later, here is my contact information [Present contact information]. Also, I may need to contact you later for additional questions or clarification.

Thank you for your time and participation!

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Form (Page 1 of 3)

Verbal Consent to Participate in Research
University of Oklahoma

Hello, I am Darnell Smith, a Doctoral Candidate from the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education and I invite you to participate in my research entitled ***Make It Yours: Black Male Student-Athletes Recount Their Division II Experiences***. This research is being conducted at The University of Oklahoma. I selected you as a possible participant because as a Black male student-athlete in your Junior or Senior year at an NCAA Division II historically white institution, you have unique experiences and perceptions of yourself and others like you at comparable institutions that will help others of similar or different backgrounds to understand Black male student-athlete experiences in Division II. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to gain insight into Division II Black male student-athlete experiences at historically white institutions.

How many participants will be in this research? About 15 people will take part in this research.

Will I be compensated for participating? You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you will participate in a sixty-minute individual interview. All interviews will be conducted virtually via a videoconference application (e.g., Zoom, Teams, or Webex) or via phone and will be recorded. I will also perform member checking when I code and analyze the data. During this time, I will check in with you to ensure the data I have collected from you is accurate.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate? Potential risks to you by participating in this study are minimal, but it is possible that by talking about your experiences as a Division II Black male student-athlete you could trigger emotional or stressful memories. Measures to minimize the potential risks will be through asking you to do what makes you comfortable. You will only be asked to answer questions which you feel comfortable answering, and to the degree you deem appropriate. At any time, you are welcome to withdraw your participation. This information is listed on your consent form, and besides I will convey this information throughout our interactions. In addition, although your name will be kept confidential, an essential element of this research is your positionality or story. Stories that are unique to you may make it easy for those reading this paper to identify you. In addition, there is a risk of accidental data release if I collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, I will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office (OneDrive).



IRB NUMBER: 16156
IRB APPROVAL DATE:

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Form (Page 2 of 3)

Research that might reveal intent to harm self or others: I will ask you questions about difficult interactions or situations with others or at your institution, such as how race has impacted your experiences as a student-athlete. If you tell me that you want to hurt someone else or that you have considered hurting yourself, I am legally obligated to report this to the appropriate government organization.

Who will see my information? There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records. You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Video or Audio Recording of Research Activities: To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on a video or audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording.

Data collected online or by a device and transmitted electronically: You will be asked to participate in an online survey and videoconference (e.g., zoom) as part of this research. The organization hosting the data collection platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made about their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, contact me, Darnell Smith, at Djsmith@ou.edu or my advisor, Dr. Siduri Haslerig, at 405-325-4193 or via email, haslerig@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).



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Appendix C: Verbal Consent Form (Page 3 of 3)

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

a) Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes ___ No
b) Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes ___ No
c) May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___ No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed?
_____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

_____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

_____

Signature of the Researcher: _____



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