Identity, Leadership, and Success:  
A Study of Black Male Student-Athletes at the University of Missouri  
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Study findings suggest one really cannot understand black male student athletes until one understands their families—this is inclusive of their immediate and extended families, but it also includes broader understandings of the black family experience historically, generationally, and institutionally.

Said another way, one really cannot understand and appreciate a black athlete’s family or journey if one has no context or understanding of how systems of oppression (including institutionalized racism) have significantly impacted racial, socio-cultural, economic, and educational opportunities and disparities in the United States.

While it is true that we all have the power of choice, choices are not made in a vacuum—choices are made from the context of the information (expectations) and opportunities (exposure; experiences; experimentation) that one is presented with, prepared for, and positioned to optimize and communicate (expression). This study’s findings suggest that to effectively support black male student athletes in forming healthy identities and then flourishing in these ideas, there must be a healthy balance of individual and institutional accountability.

Drawing on a dynamic data set of 52 black male student athlete voices, victories, and visions of success, this report includes exciting programmatic frameworks and a model for socialization (P.A.C.T: Preparation; Achievement; Core; Transition) that the principal investigator developed in light of his research, recent racialized tensions on the University of Missouri’s campus, and his findings that more nuanced and contextualized levels of understanding related to the forming of individual and institutional identities are needed by those who desire to help black male student athletes flourish as fully supported, engaged and integrated members of our campuses and communities.

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This report is part of a larger research project and programmatic initiatives related to this important topic and the principal investigator’s research agenda. The full report will be released subsequently.

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Academic All-American Board in the Missouri Athletic Training Complex (MATC) at the University of Missouri (MU) Athletic Department suggests that MU has not produced a single Black male Academic All-American student-athlete. While there are many images of MU Black male athletes excelling in their sports on the walls of the Athletic Department, the absence of a Black male Academic All-American student-athlete is problematic, particularly for a tier one AAU research institution. As a Black male faculty member at MU, this study emerged as I began to reflect on what this absence suggests about MU’s past, present, and future as it relates to the holistic development of Black male athletes, and what the images on the walls potentially mean to our current Black male athletes. The purpose of the study was to better understand our MU Black male student-athletes, their aspirations, and how their life stories impact how they see themselves and their experiences on campus. Certainly, the challenges that athletes like Ray Rice, Ray McDonald, Aldon Smith, Adrian Peterson, Derrick Washington, Dorial Green-Beckham, and others have faced have drawn attention to the behavior of Black male athletes and raises concerns about social responsibility and student engagement. Additional research is needed to better understand Black male student-athlete identity and their experiences prior to the behavior, particularly at an institution like the University of Missouri—a university in a small Midwestern town with limited diversity, yet only two hours drive from Ferguson, MO. This study sought to fill this gap in the literature.

Scholars have examined important variables related to the identities of Black male student-athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 2000; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002). Building on this scholarship, this qualitative study aims to better understand MU Black male student-athletes, their aspirations and the roles MU Athletics can play in leading them toward healthy identity development while here at MU and beyond. Our research questions were as follows:

1) How do Black male student-athletes at MU Athletics form identities and define success?
2) How do the life histories of Black male student-athletes at MU contribute to their identities, decisions, and leadership while at MU?

Exploring Black Masculinities

The masterscript on Black men in the U.S. has a long and disturbing history that has been crafted since the forced arrival of enslaved Africans (Franklin, 2007). Documents and deficit doctrines, such as Daniel Moynihan’s (1965) report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, have assisted in establishing and maintaining Black male stereotypes of abortment, apathy, and abuse (Dodson, 2007). Dominant views about Black men have proved especially problematic and persistent, particularly in social institutions (like schools) (Beasley, Miller, and Cokley, 2014). Because of the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, Black males are often required to prove that their instincts are not animalistic, anarchic, and anti-intellectual (Dodson, 2007).

Sadly, some Black males embrace the identity of the hyper-sexualized, anti-intellectual who uses the “cool pose” to shroud self-doubt, insecurities, and pain (Majors and Billson, 1992). Certainly, walking onto a college campus and being given an athletic scholarship or uniform does not exempt Black males from having to figure out who they are amidst competing messages.
espoused by the media, family, coaches, friends, and the neighborhoods that nurtured them (Harrison et al., 2002; Melendez, 2008). The reality is that some actions and characteristics that are celebrated and denote success in an athletic environment are considered crimes and reify stereotypes off the field (Beasley, Miller, and Cokley, 2014). For example, the celebration of terms and concepts like “beast mode,” or “making a great steal or violent hit” exemplify the complex terrain that Black male student athletes must navigate.

Gause (2008) speaks to the current condition of Black masculinity by highlighting society’s collective fascination with a narrow, performance-orientated brand of Black masculinity that commodifies the lives and images of black male rappers and athletes for the sake of capitalistic gain. The notion of “performativity” is particularly poignant for the black male body which has been the subject of dehumanizing, debilitating, and narrow historical, cultural, and ideological inscriptions and ideologies (Butler, 1999). For example, the deification of a black male body leaping above a basketball rim to complete a dunk partnered with the “signifying absences” of other diverse forms of positive black male expression (e.g. a Black Academic All American at MU) can demarcate limits to Black male dreams, identities, success (Butler, 1999, p. 173).

Edwards (2000) describes the contradiction this way:

Black student-athletes from the outset have the proverbial ‘three strikes’ against them. They must contend, of course, with the connotations and social reverberations of the traditional ‘dumb jock’ caricature. But black student-athletes are burdened also with insidiously racist implications of the myth of ‘innate black athletic superiority,’ and the more blatantly racist stereotype of the ‘dumb Negro’—condemned by racial heritage to intellectual inferiority. (p. 126)

Administrators and athletic programs that desire to facilitate the healthy development of Black male athletes must account for this “entangled web of contradiction” (Edwards, 2000). Certainly, there is much to learn about who our Black male athletes are at MU and the complex identities and contexts they must navigate as Black men, students, athletes, sons, brothers, and leaders.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: BLACK MALES CROSSING OVER

This research was informed by border theory as the conceptual framework to better understand Black male student-athlete identity at MU. Border theory was chosen for its flexibility; it provides scholars with language and tools to navigate the edges and territory of complex terrain and identities. In general, identity construction is a complex and contested process (Gause, 2008; Giroux, 2005) that includes, but is not limited to, an amalgamation of difference across and within a continuum of races, genders, social classes, sexual orientations, religions, (dis)abilities, languages, political allegiances, and other culturally and historically contextualized markers (Butler, 1999; Gause, 2008). At times, identity markers can function somewhat separately from and in concert (or conflict) with other identity markers (e.g. student-athlete), as borders are encroached, pushed, redefined, and reestablished individually, ideologically, and institutionally (Douglas, 2012). This was one of the most significant benefits of using border crossing theory to study how Black male student-athletes at MU form identity and define success: border theory encompasses multifaceted approaches that can use hybrid positionalities (e.g. student-athlete, black male, African-American) to problematize and reconfigure how identities are formed and power is distributed within and across difference (Douglas, 2012).
Black males—like males of other racial backgrounds—are charged with crossing over many borders as they transition to manhood (Douglas, 2012). However, prior research on Black male student-athlete identity development suggests that negotiating the transition to manhood as a Black male while simultaneously managing the expectations of college athletics can be a complex crossing (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Beasley, Miller, & Cokley, 2014; Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002). Border theory allows researchers to recognize and rupture the “epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that structure the language of history, power, and difference” (Giroux, 2005, p. 20). Border theory helped us account for the “entangled web of contradiction” (Edwards, 2000) while also creating space for our participants to name how their identities, histories, and experiences inform how they see themselves, success, and their futures.

Fig. 1. Identity, Leadership, & Success of Black Male Athletes

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Interviews

As part of this qualitative study, the principal investigator used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct individual interviews with 52 Black male student-athletes at MU, representing four sports: basketball (4 participants), baseball (1 participant), football (45 participants), track and field (2 participants) (Glesne, 2006). An interview protocol explored their personal and educational journeys, their cultural and racial identities, and their perceptions of
success and leadership. To recruit these athletes, the principal investigator worked through his partnerships in the athletic department, who assisted in recruiting students directly and via coaches and support staff. Participation in the study was voluntary and recruitment was incentivized through a $20 gift certificate for interview participants. Interviews were conducted in a private tutoring room in the Missouri Athletic Training Complex or in another mutually agreed upon location between the researcher and interviewees. The principal investigator collected 60 hours of interview data, with each interview running for approximately 60-90 minutes.

**Observations**

The principal investigator informally observed participants in spaces in and around the athletic department (e.g. dining hall, practice) and during a home gameday experience as context for the oral histories they constructed and shared during our interviews or interactions. Observations were primarily used as context to better interpret and inform the information shared in the interviews. Observation field notes were recorded in a journal.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis as outlined by Glesne (2006) was used to analyze the data. The steps of the thematic analysis process are (1) collect data; (2) coding and categorizing the data; (3) searching and synthesizing for patterns; (4) and interpret the data. Specifically, data from the interviews was audio taped, transcribed, analyzed, and coded through attentiveness to the participant’s selectivity, slippage, repetition, and “the pattern[s] of their own priorities” (Casey, 1993, p. 19). Participants’ narratives were assessed based on the topics, ideas, people, recollections, and stories that were privileged during the interviews. The principal investigator was also attentive to the dynamics that are omitted by the participants. Data analysis proceeded inductively to find commonalities among the participants. In pursuit of validity in this study, the principal investigator allowed for and examined “competing explanations and discrepant data,” so that the study affirmed the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of the Black males who participated rather than being a reflection of the researcher’s own biases. The researcher utilized a transcription company to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The researcher typed up the observation field notes; each was then coded inductively for themes and patterns. Data analysis and representation trustworthiness were attended to through member checks and peer review (Hatch, 2002).

**FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

Emergent themes suggest that Black male student athletes at the University of Missouri encounter a broad array of experiences, obstacles, and challenges as they engage their personal and academic journeys. Building on previous research by the principal investigator (Douglas, 2014, 2012; Douglas & Arnold, in press), the presentation of findings is organized around ten themes, namely: expectations, experiences/experimentation, exposure, expression, education, environment, economics/ economic empowerment, and emigration.
EXPECTATIONS

Family Complexities, Father Loss

No family is perfect. Certainly families from various backgrounds have challenges and experience disconnects. Still, it is noteworthy that an overwhelming number of the study participants described family arrangements and tensions that significantly impacted their personal and academic journeys. The principal investigator interviewed seven participants before encountering a MU Black male student athlete who described a consistently healthy relationship with his biological father and biological mother. Andre, a track and field athlete, described his relationship with his biological father this way:

Life's too hard. Man, I've been through so much. Pretty much my mom raised me. Been living with my mom for -- oh, goodness. My parents got divorced when I was in the first grade. I lived with her when I was -- okay. Well, my dad kicked me out when I was in eighth grade, so I've lived with her since eighth grade, but [mom got] custody when I was a freshman, so that was pretty big. No. He kicked me out in seventh grade. [Mom got] custody in the eighth, so that's been a big deal. Haven't talked to him since I was like 13. He's weird…. [He’s] always got to be right. So that's that.

Marco described similar disconnects with his father despite desiring to have a healthy relationship with him:

I really want to have a healthy relationship with him (his father), but I don't -- because, like, when I went home last week, I seen him one time, he came to [my] house. Like, I had a hoodie around here, and I was just playing a game -- I got done playing a game -- and I looked down, and he was like, "Oh, hey man, I didn't know that was you." So I shook his hand, and that was just it. And he just left…. I mean, I was just like -- I don't know. That was awkward. And then he was like, "I tried calling your phone, I was calling, like, the last phone numbers you had; did you get your number changed or something?" No. I didn't get my number changed. "Your mama got her number changed, I tried her phone too." And we just made a joke about it. And then CJ was like, "He said he called the last phone number, but he didn't get no answer." So he was like, you know he's lying. But I don't get why; why lie?

Participants noted that complexities and concerns for family dynamics back at home were realities that impacted their on campus experiences, particularly as they sought to focus on the responsibilities of college life and the additional expectations and pressures related to athletics.

Village: Grandparents, Surrogate Family, Extended Kin

While many study participants noted breaches in their relationships with biological fathers and a few noted strained relationships with mothers, it was also common for participants to note the influence of extended family members (e.g. uncles, siblings), grandparents, and surrogate family members who formerly or informally adopted these young men while providing important mentorship and love.
At the time of his interview, Q described himself as an aspiring coach who was preparing for his final season of play because he saw his future on the sidelines rather than on the football field. Q attributes his confidence in his coaching career options off the field and pursuit of this pathway to his relationship with his adoptive father and the information he shares with him about coaching and money management:

My dad tries to teach me about money all the time because he says listen, you can be as smart as you want to. There are a lot smarter people that are making no money. You've got to know what you're doing. This is what Black people aren't teaching you….I'm blessed to have a dad that's Black that knows what he's doing with his money and that can teach me about it. And I still have a lot to learn and I know it. I'm definitely far from it. And he teaches me. We're definitely okay. He'll make it seem like we're broke, but I know we're okay.

The transitions in Q’s family and financial dynamics were not without complication. While he noted that financially “we’re definitely okay” now, his family received support from his grandmother and a surrogate family who helped provide housing for his family while his parents worked “crazy crazy hours” to better position the family: “I would describe my neighborhood for me at the beginning, early childhood, it wasn't a rough, rough area, but it was a poor area.” He continued,

We used to stay with this white lady in her upstairs attic. My dad (adoptive father) was working so he couldn't be there all the time, but I stayed with my mom and we stayed with this white couple. They were old, elderly, and they let us stay upstairs. So I did that. We lived on top of a restaurant for a while. There was an upstairs to the restaurant. It wasn't terrible. We found a way to make our money work to where we were safe back then. My mom was smart like that….A lot of times, I was by myself…..I stayed with my grandma for a year. My childhood, I moved around. I did a lot before we started doing well. I shifted. I was never in one spot.

While Q’s described his relationship with his adoptive father and extended kin as strong, his relationship with his biological father has been a source of disappointment:

…I was always given love. Wherever I was at, I was given love still. Grandma, I still love. My mother -- she made sure I wasn't going to feel her absence because she came back as often as she could. And so she made sure that she knew I care about her. My biological father -- that's a point of my life that's been hard to talk about because he would be the type of person who would say that he was going to pick me up and then never show up. I'd be waiting on him because at first you have to do the whole you've got weekends and do that bit. And then after a while of him ditching me, my mom said she had enough and went to court and all of that, so I never had to deal with him again. And my step dad had a bit role in it too. He was like you're not going to keep not picking up. When you say be ready, be here to pick him up, you know what I mean? When I turned 16, I received a Facebook message from him and it was telling me a whole long list about why my mom didn't let him see me and all of these excuses and everything like that. At
first it was kind of tough because I didn't know the reality like that. I know what I've been
told. And you want to give the benefit of the doubt for a second. And then I thought about
it again and I'm like 16 years, I didn't get a birthday card. There's no way they'd keep you
from your son like that. You've got to -- but it turns out he had another family. I've got a
half brother -- two half-brothers I don't know about. Well, I met them one time.... So that
was kind of tough. And he had a new baby. I think like two or something like that. That's
a half-brother. But I've never had that relationship obviously. He has contacted me
several more times since I was 16. Just on Facebook. Sometimes I reply. Sometimes I
don't. But I think -- I would like to think I've reached a point where it doesn't affect me as
much and that's what I please try to tell myself. Obviously if he were to come in the room
right now, I'd run around the corner. I don't know how I'd react. I don't really know what
I'd do. Because you want to know some things like where's stuff you get from. Why do
you look like this a little bit? Luckily, I take after my mother a lot as far as looks. But as
far as history on that side of the family, I don't know anything. And it would be
interesting to actually know something. That's the only regret I think I have for him not
being in my life right now.

In general, participants were positive and appreciative of the roles and relationships that
extended family members played in their life journeys. In many instances, there was fluidity in
family dynamics and relationships at various stages of their lives that the young men had to
adjust to and accept as par for their course. Still, data suggested that the young men valued the
sacrifices of family members and extended kin, as evidenced by the participants' words of
adoration that often undergirded descriptions of complex family dynamics.

**Family Love and Loyalty**

Despite the tensions and family complications, many study participants identified their families
as one of the aspects of their lives they were most proud of. Family loyalty, resilience and pride
characterized the perspectives of many young men in the study when describing their families
and neighborhoods. In some cases, participants noted that their homes and families served as
surrogate support systems for other friends and youth of their neighborhood. Philip’s parents are
married and though his dad “wasn’t around a lot” because of work commitments, they have a
“pretty good relationship.” Philip noted, “So some would kind of look to my house, you know,
because my mom was real supportive of everyone. So if you were hungry, you come to my
house, spend the night. I had friends living at my house a lot -- sometimes weeks. One friend was
there for a month at a time.” Demonstrating how family values and structure can intersect with a
student-athlete’s sense of identity perception of education, Sergeant noted:

So most of my family is in ****. I've been an athlete since I can remember. I've always
played multiple sports. My parents taught me education is important and so I take
education seriously. I've always had good grades. I'm not a big partier. Just like chilling
with my friends. I believe friends and family is like really important to me so -- that's a
really big deal.

Similarly, Jeremiah, a track and field athlete noted, “I'm very close to my dad. And I feel like --
well with me, I feel like Coach is that other father figure that I have in my life, my father and

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Coach…. I'm close to my mom too. But she always like you've got to get a job, boy, like what if this doesn't work out…. I had both of my parents….”

When asked what he was most proud of, Trae, an accomplished student-athlete, shared a perspective that encapsulates realities of triumph and tensions that student athletes navigate between home and here. His response is worthy of extended consideration:

[I most value] My family. At first I was going to say being here. But I wouldn't be here without my family and how close we are. The family that I live with back home is just my mother, my older brother, older sister and younger sister. But none of us have the same father. We all have the same mother. But you know, fathers came and went, we all stayed with our mom and you know, stuck it out no matter what. And then we moved to this white neighborhood and just to see how those families would interact and see how those children would treat their parents was crazy to me. But then I realized that they had never even been in any of the situations -- they never truly had to rely on each other. You know what I mean really been down to your last where you like really needed that person more than anything. So you don't have that deep appreciation for them and deep respect knowing that they’ll go for the ends of the earth for you. You know, we fight, do all that stuff. Me and my brother fought. He beat me up and never let me win anything, all that older brother stuff. But at the end of the day, I’d run a mile barefoot over glass if he needed me.

Consistent with the love many participants expressed for their mothers, Trae continued:

And then just seeing how hard my mom worked to support all of us. Just seeing how hard she worked to have nothing, because she was in college when she met my brother's father. Got pregnant, had to drop out, just completely let go of her dreams of education and she was playing tennis on a full scholarship at the time. Let go of that dream to raise my brother. And then not shortly long after, my sister. So up until college, I had never even said the word bitch because my mom was the almighty queen, you know so I couldn't even imagine letting the words come out of my mouth.

Like many study participants, Trae was not proud of his use of derogatory language like “b*tch” to describe a woman. He and other participants suggested their use of this language was a somewhat problematic reality grounded in their exposure to neighborhood jargon and music.

Notably, derogatory language was not the only thing some participants had been exposed to. Pain and loss were all-too-common realities for many black male student athletes in this study; yet, resiliency, family love and loyalty were the common responses to adversity.

EXPERIENCES/ EXPERIMENTATION/ EXPOSURE

Navigating Adversity, Overcoming Pain

Participants described facing a diverse array of challenges growing up. Many noted navigating rough neighborhoods as a primary obstacle they had to overcome—neighborhoods that could be
described as complex extended family networks for some. For others, it was the realities of navigating new neighborhoods, and the realities of being a minority in white neighborhoods. A participant noted:

I had a lot of friends die just because of the area I was in I was younger. So my mom moved us out of that into an all-white neighborhood. So that was like a culture shock, going from all black to all white. And then on top of that, it was all, it was just the most racist situation I had ever been in in my life. Like being afraid to walk to school, we had walking with screwdrivers, me and my older brother and sister. My brother was like getting beat up with lacrosse sticks, getting jumped and stuff like that.

While some black males in the study noted negative exposure and experimentation in their neighborhoods, others also described receiving guidance from neighborhood leaders (sometimes individuals who were involved in illicit activities) who protected them from “the trap,” in part because these leaders saw the young man’s athletic potential as a pathway to a successful life. Sadly, a few participants found their most negative influences inside their homes. Trae described his exposure to marijuana this way:

The first time I smoked marijuana, I was 13 with my dad because I was in his room snooping around while he was at work and I found it, and was playing with it. And just I guess left it there for him. So when he came home he found it, you know put the two of them together, made me smoke. And he had always just smoked heavy. The house always smelled like it, so it wasn't a big deal. Once I got to high school, I got serious about sports and that's when I started playing football. I had always been too big to play before that. And I got -- I started to like it, got a taste for it and decided to take it seriously. So I was able to stop smoking because I didn't think that you could make it to this level or to the NFL if you did. And that's kind of the picture that was presented to me.

Trae’s discussion of the experiences of his home is worthy of extended consideration—not just because it exemplifies the intensity of the pain that some black male athletes carry, but also because it suggests the unresolved nature of some of their wounds and the potential implications for how they may seek to manage or avoid the intense memories of a complex past. He noted:

It's funny because I don't really feel anything towards him [his father]. Since I was little, we never -- I don't think that we ever had a relationship to be ruined. You know what I mean? There was never some type of father son bond to be broken and like me be so heartbroken because he ruined my trust and never showed up. You know what I mean, never came back, never, you know what I mean? It was always from the get go like smash mouth, do what you're told or it's physical. So it didn't really -- there's no -- I mean and then also the next morning, like just I get out of the shower, or no, I'm like probably nine or ten, she tells me get in the bath, I don't want to take a bath because I'm ten years old, you know what I mean? So I get in, sit down, wash off, like my face and come out of the bathroom 20 seconds later, telling him and I'm done, and he gets mad because I'm lying to him and my back is not wet or something. And he's trying to whoop me but I'm struggling, squirming. I end up like getting the banister of the steps in between me and
him and I'm about to get away, and so he just pushes me and I fall down steps into the china case. I got a whole bunch of cuts. My brother cleans me up when he gets home, wraps my arm up. It's like just bleeding a whole lot, but we don't know what to do. My dad is still in his room. We wake up the next day, put a long sleeve shirt on, everything is fine. You know what I mean, don't talk about it. He's talking to you like everything; you know what I'm saying? It's normal, completely fine.

Certainly, relational loss showed up in the narratives of a number of athletes. Similarly, loss in the form of untimely deaths was another unfortunate motif in the journeys of many black male athletes. For example, John D, a freshman basketball player, noted that sport was an escape from the shocking string of deaths—three friends lost since he left home: “[I’ve had] Friends who got killed and everything…. Like my growing up friends…. Just neighborhood stuff. Just trying to be something they weren't. I always tried to be right there.” While John D acknowledged that his physical distance from his neighborhood has likely protected him from a similar fate, he struggles to navigate the pain of inexplicable bad news from home via social media. He continued:

I just see it on Instagram and I'm like, what's going on? What happened? He got shot. It's like, what? Yeah. One of my young boys, he was a freshman when I was in high school last year and he got into a bad car wreck with another -- two little kids that I knew from my school. I was really close with him.

Like many other participants in the study who received bad news from back home, John D did not share his loss with coaches or athletic staff. When asked about his process of dealing with these losses, his response revealed a lack of communication about his pain and the inherent complexity and contradiction in his efforts to not think about it: “I ain't no fake, I just go shoot the ball. I go shoot just to keep my mind off things. Just play loud music and just be chilling. I don't even really try to think about it…. I'll just be like, man, what's the world coming to? I just start thinking.”

The experiences and backgrounds of the student-athletes informed how they responded to adversity. While John D tried not to think about losses, other participants found that their losses and adversity served as an impetus for new rituals (e.g. pregame tributes) and old traditions (e.g. faith).

Activating Faith, Addressing Failure

Brian’s tattoos tell a strong story—etched in images, words and symbols on his body, it’s a story of trials, triumphs, and tributes to those whose investment in him saved him from a home with a drug-addicted mother and a “step-dad” he would later learn was not his biological father. In this context, after taking custody of Brian in fourth grade, Brian’s grandfather was his everything—his father and his inspiration:

My grandfather…He's the one got me into all the athletic stuff. He started me off in baseball. Then I moved to basketball, and then eventually football. And so he's been a
part of every event since then. And then he recently passed last year. And so this is new to me without him being in the stands.

It was a loss Brian had not shared with anyone on campus until his interview in this study. It was a loss that brought him to tears during the interview. To manage the loss, he asserted that his family and his faith have been crucial:

My grandma stepped up in a way—so now she's trying to come to some of the games [and] bring some more of my family...for that support mechanism. And before each game, we all go to the touchdown end zone and pray. And I just pray to God and I talk to Him, and then basically go out there and give my all.

Dealing with the realities of personal loss has impacted the academic experiences of some student-athletes. For example, Brian acknowledged the value of the tutors and academic support staff who “tell you what you got to do. They have a to-do list, so things fall into place.” Other participants were farther along in their healing process. Chris’ recovery from personal loss took a bit longer and nearly derailed his college career. He noted: “Every time I go home, it seemed like I'm losing someone that was close to me.” He lost his grandmother in 2012 and a close family friend in 2013—Ms. Smith, who he claimed “always believed in me.” He noted that these losses were compounded by injuries and lack of playing of time—experiences that caused him to activate his faith to survive:

So it just seemed like...something is always happening. But it's a blessing in disguise because it just made me realize how important life is. You can't take things for granted. That's when I lost my grandma. So the thing was I was taking things for granted. And then I called her in November and I remembered it because I told her, I was, like yeah. The season was doing well. I tore my leg on that year. That's what made me red shirt twice and that made me mad. And honestly, I was asking God why. Why? I'm trying to do all these things and why you got to halt me? And so I guess she knew it because it seemed like every time she talked to me, she was, like, well, don't let anybody get to you and you be good like you always been. Saying don't change because of your surroundings. And so once it happened, when she passed, I remember getting the call. I failed three classes. That's when I had the 1.2 [gpa]. And then football set me down and then Total Person Program, they was, like, yo, we're going to put you in a lot of hours in study hall. It's, like, I don't care. That's fine. Whatever.... I was on the borderline if they wanted to renew my scholarship or release me because I wasn't doing anything. And I made excuses. I was, like, man, my leg been hurt. I'm not about to practice. I'm not going to be your test dummy. I'm not a practice dummy. I'm a player.

Chris came back the next semester with a new mindset: “I was, like, I'm ready to play. And it was, like, what about your shoulder? You didn't get surgery done in the season when you wanted it. You still want it? I was, like no. That's all right. I don't need it no more.” Chris is now flourishing academically, and he attributed the turnaround to his faith and a renewed focus. Chris also noted the power of community service to his metamorphosis—particularly the transformation power of serving as a mentor to young people. Ironically, most participants in the study noted that they subscribed to a faith system but most of them also noted that they struggled
to go to church in Columbia because of their busy schedules and difficulty connecting with local church communities. Despite their faith commitments, many participants noted that there were also cultural disconnects with the ministerial resources available to them in the athletic department. Chris, like most participants in the study, was not a regular attendee to team chapel services.

ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMICS, AND EVERYTHING BACK HOME

Pressure, Pressure, Pressure

Managing the pressures and responsibilities related to collegiate athletics and the general expectations of being a college student emerged as a significant finding in the study. Pressure manifested itself in many forms. Often, participants noted challenges that are typical of student life on a college campus (e.g. classes; strain back at home; finances), but these variables for the athletes were heightened by realities that are endemic to the student-athlete experience (e.g. on field performance expectations) and, in some instances, particular demographics of the student-athlete population (e.g. individuals who feel their families were relying on them to send scholarship money home or “to go pro” in order to support the family). The pressure to succeed and navigate the realities of the university environment as an athlete and an academic—while also dealing with the pressures of home—were sometimes overwhelming for some student-athletes. For example, Drae noted how his 13 year-old sister’s experience had impacted him: “My sister and I have different dads…. Her father just passed away. So now my mom is really on me about talking to her all the time. Showing her more love…now that her dad is gone.” When asked whether he feels successful, Smith, a freshman football player, responded: “No. I got too many loose ends right now. I got to take care of too much. I have to take care of football [and] school…as a freshman, I only have one good semester under my belt.”

The pressure participants noted was not just about grades or geographical adjustments to a new environment; it was often a pressure that was generational. John D described how the financial strain of his family intersects with his hopes and efforts as a student athlete:

Like, shoot, months without no water. Sometimes I had no money. Oh, I never had a dad in my life. My brother and my sister, all one mother, strong mother. Man, doing my mama wrong and everything like that. Laws, the cops and everything coming into the lives of me, my brother and my mom and everything like that. We've been through some things. Like I've been through a lot now, it's like my friends dying. I used to see that in high school a little bit, but you know, not that much. Things just getting out of hand. Then I have to deal with my granny right now, so it's just a lot. I just know if I can keep doing what I'm doing out here and keep progressing and keep being a better man, things will come out and be successful for me and my mama. Everything pays off.

The pressure was also exacerbated by the fact that few people knew how deeply his family was struggling. Two of his high school coaches knew but none of his high school teachers were aware of his circumstances. He continued: “Shoot, we had to use bags to shit in, you had to pee outside and shit like that…. It was just tough, man.”
John D noted that feelings of distrust as a black male in the college environment add to the pressure he feels—a pressure to not mess up, knowing that there are many potholes that could prevent him from being able to help his family:

Yeah. Like drugs, girls, the green dot thing. Sexual violence. Domestic Violence…like all that. Being a black, African American, student athlete at [inaudible]. I don't know. Basically you just have to watch yourself. Basically watch your back at all times. Know right from wrong. Know what you're doing at all times. Never listen to anybody that you don't really know. Don't trust anybody you never came around before. People will put things in your pocket you can't accept just because of who you are and everything like that. Watch who you communicate with, with girls and how you communicate with them, because you never know what if they do. They go behind your back, like, hey, he was touching on me. And you weren't touching on them, and you have to leave the school and then they're looking at you, like, you touched a girl. That can mess up your whole reputation. That's a whole bunch of pressure. I had came from a black school, like a black Dallas hood school. I just had to adapt when I first came out here, because I didn't really know how to function with all these people…Caucasian community. I had to adjust to that and how to talk to them and everything. My mom was teaching me, towards like going into my summer, teaching me how to proper myself up. Do this, do that and everything like that. Yeah. How to talk to people, try to look into people's eyes when you talk and things like that. I usually just don't. I'll be nervous, just looking around everything like that. She taught me and everything and she told me this was going to happen, because she went to a white university and she always told me watch your back and don't believe them and never bring, you know, a [white] girl home.

Jeremiah, noted similar pressures: “I feel like people just see, not just me, but all black athletes in general at a school like this is just like oh they're here just for athletics and not to get an education.” Ray shared:

I think that with all the stress and outside factors that being in a college athlete may bring, if you don't have anybody to turn to, or anybody to talk to, and ventilate, stuff like that, then you may turn to drugs and stuff like that…temporary high, or whatever it is.

For Trae, the pressures of college athletics challenged his mental health to the extent that his thoughts and “shortcut[s] to serenity” concerned him:

Just me personally, I have to have something going, something I'm doing something. Like when I cook, I'm cooking six meals at one time, just trying to be moving. And I think when I smoke it's me trying to take a shortcut to some type of serenity, you know what I mean?... I had just had got to get the ADHD testing, and my mentor was saying she wanted to make sure that they looked at depression. And that was surprising to me, but it wasn't at the same time. But I guess it was something I really wasn't trying to hear. Because I've always thought about like that. Like suicide to me, up until probably two or three years ago was always just been the easy way out because my brother struggled with suicide a few years ago. And it's just always been like you're not making the decision to work on your problems, so you're just going to kill yourself. Whatever situation you're in,
no matter what the circumstances, you can make some sort of decision to take a step in the right direction or fight your way out. But you would just say, I mean no matter who cares about you, no matter who is dependent on you, just fuck it, I'm going to end it all. I just felt like that was selfish, that was cheap, that was an easy way out. And then, I don't know my brother struggled with it and everything was different. And then I found myself thinking differently to as to where it's like well why even keep trying. And that was like I had never -- I'm never the type of person to say that, you know what I mean? But then I just get to this place where, and that's the only time I will let myself say I might be depressed just because I do have a sense of hopelessness. But like my sense of control over like my day to day life gets so small like I'll just wake up with a pit in my stomach, you know what I mean, nervous so hard you want to smoke just to get that nervousness away. Because I just woke up, I have no reason to be nervous yet. You know what I mean? So I wake up, check up clock and I'm calculating how many minutes I got left in bed. And then I find that out and I'm thinking how long it's going to take me to drive to where I need to be. So I calculate that and that tells me how long I can be in bed. Then I'm thinking how long is it going to take me to get dressed to get to the car. So now I've got to add that and take that away from the time I'm in bed. And then I go and do whatever I have to do. Nine times out of ten when I'm leaving the house in the morning, it's something that was put on my schedule. You know what I mean? Like I'll go to study hall, two classes and a study hall and I don't want to be at any of them. You know what I mean? It's just back to back to back.

And then that will go straight into practice. And then I'll come out of practice so tired and just beat up that I don't really have any patience, really anything left. You know what I mean, because I'm trying to give it up at practice for my teammates and I may have a study hall still after practice. And then I go home at the end of the night and I just sit there. Because I'm like well I can't smoke, I don't really have the energy to take my dog out to the, you know what I'm saying. I can't go to a movie because I've got to be up at 7:00 again in the morning. It's about 8:00, the MATC was serving shitty food so now I'm trying to make some dinner. I don't eat dinner until 9:45. I might have some homework, I might try to get somebody to do it for me. You know what I mean? If I can, I'm going to be doing that until late. And then the next thing I know it's time to go to bed and I'm stressing about what I've got to do the next day and upset because I'm feeling like I didn't even accomplish anything today. Like I'm just going from place to place showing up but not getting no closer to my goal and on top of it, just because I've been struggling, I have been struggling in my classes.

Navigating pressure was a consistent theme across the data set. Trae acknowledged the value of the mental health services available to him and other student-athletes in his process. His narrative was significant and consistent with themes related to resources, knowledge, and access to mental health support services—especially during particular seasons of adversity and tension (e.g. injury, poor on field performance).

Utilizing Mental Health Support and Services: Knowledge, Access, and Willingness

While Trae was actively aware of specific resources, individuals, and structures available to him
to assist in healthily managing pressure, there were many other participants who had a vague knowledge of available services and still others who were completely unaware or unwilling to access mental health support services. In some cases, participants noted that they didn’t feel they could connect with available personnel due to cultural incongruence—in particular, there were some participants who expressed the perception that current personnel could not relate to them interpersonally. Alternatively, there were some participants who noted they had accessed positive support from current counseling resources in the athletic department or they would be willing to do so if they needed the resource in the future.

Jared offered a poignant assessment of how personal challenges and pressure intersected in his journey:

Well, for me, personally, just being away from home. Like, when we're having family issues, going home, I can't really just go directly to the problem. Stuff like that…. I lost plenty [of friends to death]….I lost three right before my birthday, three weekends in a row. Well, one of them was at a party. There was a fight at the party, a stray bullet hit him with somebody shooting. He was just [inaudible]; that was one. The other one was, I believe in another party the next weekend. I guess somebody thought he had something to do with drugs. He was at a red light, they came and shot his car up, shot him in the head twice. And the third one was trying to rob somebody. And I guess when he opened the backseat of the car, somebody blew his head off. So, yeah. Um, it makes me grateful to still be alive, sometimes be out of *****. Because I feel like if I would have stayed I would have been probably right there with them.

When asked who he talks to when he has a problem, he responded: “Nobody. I keep it in until it explode.” For him, exploding looked like the following:

Uh, it's usually me just having a bad attitude. Like, at the beginning of this semester, I had, like, a lot of stuff. Like, my parents were struggling with the bills at home, so I was getting my checks and sending them to them after I paid my bills up here. And it was stressing me out, like I was saying, I had a 'tude for, like, a week or two. I kind of took it out on the coaches, like, I was just talking back, bad body language and stuff. But it all passed, and I'm back on [inaudible] times now.

He shared the following when pressed further about what services he thought could have helped him to maybe deal with the stress he was facing a little bit better: “Um, to actually just talk about it with my -- with my family. Because, like, when stuff happen it just a habit that I got, I just -- I just keep everything in, thinking I can overcome it.”

Though he struggled to specifically recall the name of the counselors he could access in the athletic department or on campus, he did note: “I know that we got -- I don't know the lady's name in the back…. I know we got her [a counselor] back there.” Of significance, he also stated he would be willing to talk to the counselor if he needed to.
EXPECTATIONS & EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS

Complexities related to Race, Racism, and Stereotypes

Study data suggest that race was a topic many of the black male participants thought about. While most participants noted that they felt relatively safe on campus at the time of the interviews (spring of 2015) and in the college town in which they were studying, they also acknowledged complexities and concerns about the broader experience of black people in the U.S. Randy, a football player, stated:

It's hard for me to feel safe as a black man. I don't always feel safe, even around the police just because I know that I have to be on perfect behavior. Even if you know you're right, it's dangerous for a black man to talk back to police, because for so long it's been that what they say is going to outweigh what you say every single time. Thank God for cameras now, because now you're catching them in the act, but I feel like this is just -- I hate to say it, but Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, all these dudes are just, in a sense, they're just numbers on a wall again because this is not the first time it's happened. I come from the Deep South. I come from going to play football games and seeing Confederate flags at the fields. I come from being called a nigga by white folks or white parents when I'm at the games, being called a nigga by the kids while I'm out there playing. I come from that. When my mother was growing up, like I said, she grew up in a small town. When my mother was growing up, one of her mother's brothers was drug through town by horse and buggy because he got caught looking -- like passing a glance at a white woman, so they caught him and they drug him through town. I come from that.

Regional variables were noted and seemed to impact the racialized perspectives of participants. Most participants noted that they were treated well as a student-athlete in a college town, but some also questioned whether their positionality as a student-athlete was the reason they were treated favorably—rather than their intrinsic human value. Drae, a basketball player, noted:

[I]t's been different. I mean, I'm from ******, so it's already been a culture shock in the first place. But I mean, you can tell that the -- that -- I don't know. It's weird. You can tell some people are kind of -- they kind of look at you and don't know what to think. You almost feel uncomfortable when they see you. And then I've had situations where I've got black friends that don't play basketball. And a white person might come up and laugh and smile in my face because I'm on the basketball team and show me a lot of love, but my friend, they don't know them, so they kind of like shy away. You know what I mean? … you never know if it's real or not. It's kind of just you're on the basketball team.

Most participants described experiencing “culture shock” in having to adjust to a predominately white environment, and some noted feeling uncomfortable in particular areas on campus, like Greek Town. Seargeant, a math and physics major, explained how he was often (mis)read as anti-intellectual and a thug due to his positionality as a black male with dreads:

It is definitely a different kind of culture because I don't know how to try to say it. It's like you are always standing out sort of. I just take it on as a responsibility to myself.
Since I'm always standing out I just kind of be myself…. A lot of people think that I'm a hood rat, like [gang] banger,…kind of guy. But that's not me at all. People automatically assume.

Ironically, despite these tensions, a number of black-male athletes also noted that they were in interracial relationships. Jared explained:

Honestly, I was thinking -- honestly, a couple months ago I was thinking all this is happening and you're with a white woman. What are you doing? You love your people, blah, blah, blah, and at the same time you can't tell your heart who you love. One thing, my girlfriend, she understands [some of the racial complexities]. When she doesn't understand, she asks me to explain it to her and I'm able to give her examples. I'm able to help her understand. Honestly, a big problem in our relationship is that her father is extremely racist. I've never met her father, but her father comes to every single Mizzou game. Her father sits right next to where we run out of our tunnel. I've never met the man. He doesn't want to meet me and frankly I'm not too -- I told her, like baby, look, I love you, but if I never meet your dad, I'm okay with that. I've got people in my life -- I've got people in my life who are going to love me regardless. I don't need his love. I don't need his approval. Being able to balance that out with her, it's been a struggle sometimes. She'll say something and it'll -- I'm quick to snap sometimes and I have to realize she doesn't understand. She doesn't understand my point of view. She doesn't see the world through the same lens that I see it. Honestly, I was a little worried about telling my grandparents that I had a white girlfriend that I was actually serious about. Especially, like I said, my grandparents are proud, black people. They grew up in the era where it really wasn't safe to be black.

Interpersonal and romantic relationships were not the only variables that participants felt were impacted by race. Expectations related to academics and career development were also noted as factors.

**Expectations Related to Academics/ Career Development**

The most common majors of participants were undecided; general studies; sports management; and hospitality management. There were some participants who had undertaken more rigorous majors, but, in general, many participants did not have a strong sense of their academic pathway; of the “what next”; of the expectations to be an Academic All-American; of the possibility that they could earned a doctorate—some heard the term “doctorate” for the first time during the study while others knew what it was because of their interactions with their former head strength coach—a black male with a doctorate—who talked to them about the doctoral process and the requirements needed to be an Academic All-American. Notably, the notion or hope of playing in the pros was pervasive for many of the participants. Informed by his perspective as the son of a former athlete and his belief that economic and traditional educational systems are not designed for everyone to flourish (particularly black males)—Trae offered the following assessment:

I don't even think college is meant for everybody. The only reason I'm in college is to make it to the league. I don't even, you know. I just don't think it's a path for everybody.
The way they test might not be for you, you might be emotionally intelligent or spatially, physically. But I just, it's all about a means to an end for me. My dad has a college degree and still lives in the ghetto. He still lives next to the same people who are selling crack or selling dope or whatever. That dropped out of high school and he went [to high school]. He studied hard, played basketball, got a full ride scholarship and you know otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to go to college. He wouldn't have been able to afford to. Studied hard, almost failed out his first year, went through all this struggle and hardship just to move back, to blow his knee out, have a degree in some type of mathematics, get a job for the state, and be living two blocks from where he grew up at..... He was playing overseas for a year after he got his degree and then he had got invited to the NBA drafts, but then blew both of his knees out two or three weeks before the draft. So that just ended his whole basketball career. He had to do like two and a half years of rehab, to walk correctly because it was just a really bad injury. And I think emotionally, that was tough for him. To not only not be playing basketball anymore, which was his whole life but also having to realize that he was never going to play again and now he has to start living the life of, like a 9:00 to 5:00 job, not going working out and being active, sitting at a desk and crunching numbers.

The question of who has been affirming and sustaining the notion of professional athletics as the way out and who has been disrupting that notion are concepts worthy of ongoing study and consideration. In the words of Dr. James L. Moore—an expert in counselor education and African American males, “sometimes disruption creates innovation” (personal communication, September 29, 2015). Study data suggest that leaders and organizations who desire to effectively nurture black males into broader considerations of their options and life pathways must disrupt the narrow notion that their only pathway to success is via the field of play. Leaders must also account for the distrust that many black males have toward systems and structures deemed oppressive. For example, a black male who implicitly or explicitly questions whether an education or a college degree can actually provide access to future opportunities and success must be constructively and contextually engaged in these areas rather than dismissed or libeled. Additionally, Black male student athletes must be exposed to the best of who they are and who they can become in a variety of fields—this includes having a diversity of progressive black male and black female role models in administrative, leadership, faculty and mentorship positions within athletic departments and across campus. Study data suggest that the requisite exposure doesn’t always happen via the mechanisms and opportunities in their schools, neighborhoods, media, or (for many) their families. Participant interviews suggest that the dream of professional athletics begins early for black males; they often see athleticism (rather than academics) as the only way out of their neighborhoods, and the dream is reinforced by the success and deification of prominent black athletes, lack of exposure to black male leaders and exemplars of other pathways, and school experiences that reinforce the notion that their best bet is between the hash marks or off the backboard rather than in higher education or in the books.

**EXPRESSION: Improving Communication, Facilitating Emigration**

An overwhelming majority of the participants noted a desire to become more proficient and confident in their communication skills. Many participants expressed discomfort with engaging and dialoguing with whites—particularly those who had limited exposure to white people or
white communities prior to arriving on campus. While many participants suggested that they saw themselves as leaders, they also noted that they wanted to become “more vocal leaders.” Most participants acknowledged that they would be interested in a leadership development program like the Tiger Leadership Institute but few of them actually engaged or completed the application process. This disconnect suggests that there may be need for more specialized programs that take the opportunities to black males rather staff waiting or hoping for them to come to leaders to express their willingness to engage. This disconnect suggests that a transitional initiative/mentorship program exclusively for black males may be warranted. There are power dynamics that must be considered when programs are initiated and invitations are given; including many participants’ stated discomfort with communicating with white people, concerns for overextending their time commitments, disconnects related to how black males see themselves and their potential as academics, and the administrative hurdles (e.g. getting letters of recommendation) that may inhibit a black male student athlete from engaging or pursuing a leadership development program opportunity.

Despite their muscular bodies and bravado on the field, many of these young men were really shy. Some of them were massive human beings but they didn’t feel empowered intellectually. They wanted to make themselves small in the classroom and big on the field—the field was the context where they got affirmation. Dr. James L. Moore notes, “The psychological reality is that where one can get love is where one will give effort” (personal communication, September 29, 2015). Participants’ desired to improve their communication skills in order to more effectively engage with diverse audiences. While participants did not use terms like border crossing or emigration in their descriptions of why they wanted to become more effective communicators, there was a border-crossing ethos that undergirded their desires and dispositions on this topic. There was an acknowledgement that this was an area of underdeveloped strength that inhibited their capacity to express themselves in all environments—and in front of all people—as proficiently as they would like, which could have implications for their capacity to transition—emigrate—effectively as leaders and men beyond their matriculation at MU.

EXPOSURE & EXPECTATION:

S: Academic All-American Board as Curricular Material

The Academic All-American board was an important part of the study and interview process. At the beginning interview, student athletes were led through the hallway of the MATC that houses the Academic All-American board, and other athletic accolades and awards. When asked about their aspirations to be an Academic All-American when they first arrived on campus, most participants admitted that this academic standard was not on their radar and they had no ambitions to pursue it. For example, when asked if he was aware of the Academic All American standards, Jeremiah responded this way: No, I didn't. I actually didn't know the requirements for academic all-American.” Jared noted:

   No, sir. I didn't know it existed until I got here…. I really just seen it on this wall back here — [and I wondered] why there ain't no black people up there --I told Coach the same thing as we walked by, we would make jokes about it. We'd be like, see, there ain't no black people up there. But, like, it's a serious, serious question -- like, why.
When asked why he didn't aspire to be an Academic All American, even after seeing the board, he responded: “Well, like I said, the initial goal is sports…coming from inner-city, it's always been sports.” Another participant, James, admitted that he would have liked to have been encouraged to pursue the Academic All-American standard, but he too was “never” made aware of these possibilities. He noted: “They just said graduate, get your degree.”

When asked about the expectations to become an Academic All-American and whether he believes he can do it, Jeremiah noted: “Yeah. I believe I can do anything…Um, [it takes] focus, confidence—um, positive affirmations—all the stuff we learn in football, basically, just applied in the classroom.” Jared was unaware of the GPA or performance requirements for the award (his GPA was below the required standard), but like other participants, he stated he would have appreciated being equipped with this information and the necessary tools at the beginning of his academic journey. Noting that he was encouraged to do his best in school by his parents, James was particularly hopeful when informed that the GPA requirement to be an Academic All-American was a 3.3. He declared: “That's it? Is it still too late? I can get up there, right?”

Most participants noted that they noticed the absence of any people of color on the Academic All-American board prior to their participation in the study. Some athletes claimed that they made this observation during their visits as high school prospects. Others learned about the requirements for this honor from their former strength and conditioning coach, who was also a collaborator on this study. Similarly, most participants shared that they were unaware of what a doctorate degree was and what would be required to attain one. Those who were aware of the possibilities of doctoral or masters level education also noted that they learned about these possibilities from their former strength and conditioning coach, who was a black male leader and holder of a doctoral degree.

Notably, the current Academic All-American board in the MATC at the University of Missouri does not tell the entire story. MU has produced a Black male Academic All-American. The current Academic All-Americans board in the MATC reflects the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) standard only; there are other entities that have acknowledged MU student athletes as Academic All-Americans, including Black males. For example, the wrestling program has produced a black male Academic All-American. The current Academic All-American board in the MATC does not reflect this and it is our recommendation that the board be revised.

**EXPOSURE: Greater Access to Mentorship, particularly from Black Male Leaders**

Black Male student-athletes at Mizzou noted that they “want more”…more opportunities to dialogue, share, and be heard in personal settings much like the interview setting for this study. Many desire more opportunities to interface with a trusted Black male mentor(s) in one-on-one and group settings—a mentor(s) who can serve as a direct contact and bridge to a team of Black male mentors. Great potential exists for focus groups, leadership development, and programmatic innovations that can enhance the personal, professional, and social development of our Black male students athletes.

A number of participants noted that they shared things they had never shared previously in their
session with the principal investigator. For some, it was the first time they had an opportunity to dialogue and share with a black male professional in a one-on-one setting. Participants noted the significant influence of the few black leaders and staff members in the athletics department. In particular, participants noted the influence of their former strength and conditioning coach as a significant mentor who “didn’t give up” on them. In addition, some participants also explained that they sought to learn from the mistakes of others, such as older brothers, and valued the insights shared by former and current coaches.

**DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted during a unique time in the history of The University of Missouri. It is the belief of the principal investigator that MU is uniquely positioned to serve as a national leader and exemplar of the possibilities that exist when an institution and its stakeholders seek to better understand and address systems of oppression. Certainly national, local, and university-level histories and events that led to the resignations of former university president, Tim Wolfe, and former chancellor, Bowen Loftin, are vitally important. History provides context for the present and future; history also helps us identify key variables toward bridging relationships, building systems of healing, and developing a robust integrated impact model reflecting the core values of the University. Some of these variables include humility, honesty, compassion, courage, education, and strategic collaboration.

In these uncertain times, there’s much we do not know; but here are a few things we do know: The University of Missouri community is currently seeking to respond to a local crisis with national implications; the nation is watching and hoping we can be part of the solution, in part because race and racism remain pressing national issues that leaders across the country are struggling to address; we know that we do not live in a post-racial society; and we know that we must learn, act, and lead—because it is the right thing to do, our students have asked us to, and the legacy and future of our university is dependant upon how we respond. One of the key takeaways from this study is the value of addressing student needs before they become demands. To address student needs, one must first be willing to understand who students are and the contexts that nurture them—the identity forming processes: the positive or negative expectations, experiences and experimentation, exposure, and expression of one’s identity. The context and capacity of flourishing identities—the reality of successfully moving from individual identity forming process to new levels of engagement are also contextual. Grounded in the larger work of this study, the principal investigator has found significance in the following variables as it relates to flourishing identities for black male student athletes in this study: education—in this context, higher education; adapting to new environments, in this case a predominately white university campus; the possibility of economic empowerment/earning power through athletics and academics; and the capacity to emigrate—to border cross to new horizons, possibilities and leadership after their sojourn on campus.

Below is a visual of this emerging framework:
It is the belief of the principal investigator that this study (and the ongoing work that is associated with it) is vital to better understanding and serving all students, particularly black students at MU and across the nation. This is important people work. Individual identities and experiences certainly matter. Yet, we also know that programmatic work is also needed to address institutional identities and experiences so that current efforts can be evaluated and enhanced. As such, the remainder of the Discussion section of this report will be used to pivot our focus toward how the study findings and individual journeys of the participants can inform our institutional approaches, understandings, and outcomes. Specifically, below is an emerging framework or model for socialization (P.A.C.T: Preparation; Achievement; Core; Transition) that the principal researcher has developed in light of his research, the recent racialized events on MU’s campus, and his findings that more nuanced and contextualized levels of understanding related to the forming of individual and institutional identities are needed by those who desire to help black male student athletes flourish as fully supported, engaged and integrated members of our campuses and wider communities.
The PACT: Preparation

Effective preparation is always contextual. Said differently, preparation should always be undergirded by questions like the following: preparation for what, preparation for whom, and preparation toward what end(s)? These questions position a leader or organization to consider the contextual variables that will inform or influence the approaches needed to broach a particular subject or accomplish a particular outcome. As a member of the Mizzou Men4Men Committee, the principal investigator was able to observe and activate aspects of the research findings and his expertise in the areas of cultural and identity studies, race and racism, and leadership. Initiated under the leadership of Mike Alden and Dr. Rick McGuire, Men4Men and Women4Women are innovative programs at the University of Missouri that are designed to promote social responsibility and offer support for student-athletes in navigating critical topics and issues related to their personal, academic, and social development as responsible citizens. The motto is ‘REAL’ Men will Respect all people, Especially women. Always do the right thing. Live a life that matters. Sample Men4Men topics have included: You Can Play (LGBTQ focus); Financial Responsibility; and Why are race and racism so hard to talk about?

Drawing on the Fall 2015 Mizzou Men4Men program focus on race and racism, below are the steps of the preparation process that was used to engage this important and powerful conversation. Steps of the Preparation Process were as follows: Process, Positionality, Perspectives, Privilege, & Platform.

The PACT: Achievement

Study data suggest that the following variables are vital components of supporting student athlete achievement: advocacy, authenticity, academic support, acceptance, assurance, assessment, accountability, access, acculturation, aspiration, actualization, and appreciation. These variables are not static, one-size fits all approaches that guarantee achievement for all athletes. Instead, they are highly contextual factors that must be engaged through culturally relevant approaches and culturally sensitive/ informed leaders, programs, and peers.
The PACT: Core

The Core phase of the PACT framework is designed to focus on key cross-sections between individual identity dynamics and institutional identity dynamics. The use of the word “audit” below is to suggest the need for continuous formal and informal research and assessment of the core aspects of an institution that is seeking to develop balanced students/athletes.

Context/Climate Audit (campus; city; county; community; country variables that could be impacting the experiences/consciousness of the student—e.g. war; tragic events like mass shootings and implications for safety concerns; elections; racial tensions and uprisings on campus)—the intention is to be ahead of any controversy or contextual factor so that healthy communication is engaged from institutional leadership to student level experience/leadership. For example, the events in Ferguson, MO (1hr & 45 minutes from MU), the growing national tensions related to race and racism, and the campus tensions and histories should have been indicators to MU administrators that they needed to be attuned to these issues and their implications for their students, faculty, campus, and leadership. While it is true that many individuals in athletics live in “a bubble,” social media and social realities are mechanisms by which these bubbles can quickly burst to the extent that a local issue can end up in the national spotlight.

Communication/Conversation Audit: Who is included and excluded from vital conversations and decision-making? Do you have the requisite people and perspectives (diversity) in the room to have the requisite conversations? Who has the ears and hearts of your students? How is information transmitted to and from your students? How quickly can you get information to and from your students? How can you ensure the information is transmitted and understood? What mediums can you use to better engage your students? What role does social media play,
particularly when working with millennials? What belief systems, fears, and barriers may be inhibiting effective communication between students and leaders/ faculty/ administration/ coaches (e.g. many black male athletes in the study discussed their desire to become more effective communicators and many also shared their discomfort with communicating with white people)? These discomforts can inhibit a student’s willingness to share a concern, acknowledge an area of underdeveloped strength, or volunteer to participate in a leadership development program. Administrators must consider what it looks like to “go to” them in culturally relevant ways rather than hoping students will come to us or volunteer for our programs—particularly if there is a vacuum of trust.

**Cultural/ Color(ed) Audit:** What blind spots do you and/or your institution have? What lens(es) are included, excluded, ignored, feared, privileged and/or dismissed? Whose voices, victories, and values are celebrated or criticized/ castigated? (e.g. are particular teams, sports or coaches privileged or perceived as being more important than others? Do you understand who your students are, where they come from, what they are seeing and feeling on your campus, and where they are going or hope to go beyond here (with consideration of who they are, where they come from etc.—individual identities and perceptions impact these variables—e.g. a black male shared his frustration about receiving information from a white finance agent because the black male didn’t feel the white agent/ former athlete could understand the experiences and challenges of being a black male in society). These tensions and disconnects must be understood and addressed. Expertise and leadership in the areas of race, social class, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability are all vital variables of a cultural audit of your department/ organization.

**Curriculum/ Curricular Audit:** What do the images on the walls and bulletin boards say about your values, history, expectations, and experiences with particular demographics (e.g. academic all-American board); what specialized courses are offered or needed to address the needs and gaps of students, staff, coaches, and administrators?

**Character/ Care Audit:** Do you have people in your building who reflect what you hope to produce? Do you have individuals that effectively communicate their care for the students in languages and packaging that the students understand and appreciate? Are your leaders effective representatives of the rhetoric (e.g. if social responsibility and respect for difference and diversity are cores of your program, then these ideals must be consistently modeled by coaches, staff, faculty and administrators)? As it relates to this study and its focus on racial identity, do you have black male and black female leaders at every level of administration—academic advisors, tutors, counselors, mentors, engaged faculty liaisons, Asst, Assoc & AD levels? It’s not enough to have black coaches, and it is problematic if there is greater representation of blacks in the dining hall, janitorial, landscaping staff then there is in executive boardrooms. A character audit includes an individual understanding and the responsible activation of epistemology (one’s ways of knowing or seeing a phenomena) and positionality (the intersection between variables like identity, beliefs, and position).

**Career Development Audit:** What do your students major in? Why? What are the stated and implied expectations of your students? Are they aware of academic and athletic opportunities and awards (e.g. the criteria to become an Academic All-American)? Where do your graduates go after graduation? What are the lengths and trends of the careers of your graduates/ former
students—e.g. what is the reputation of graduates and professional athletes who attended your institution?

Class/ Course Selection Audit: What classes do your student-athletes take? Are they interested in these courses? Are they prepared for these courses? Are they able to select their own courses? Do they know what course selection options exist? Do they have a clear idea of how their courses intersect with their career ambitions and opportunities? Are there tensions between eligibility and course selection/completion? If so, how/when are students advised through these processes and options, and by whom? Is there any class selection information that needs to be better communicated to freshmen student-athletes?

Coaching/ Certification Audit: What methods, means, modes, mentalities, methodologies are used to cultivate, demonstrate care and communicate with your students? Notably, study findings suggest that the belief that coaches must serve as the primary, all-encompassing mentor for student-athletes can be problematic because of a coach’s roles in the assessment of athlete performance and playing time variables—and the reality that coaches are paid based on the athletic performances of athletes. These conflicts of interest are rift with power dynamics that can muddy aspects of the mentor/mentee relationship and inhibit an athlete’s willingness to honestly share challenges with some coaches. Additionally, coaches are limited in the contact hours they can have with athletes in season and out of season; this reality heightens the significance of Academic and Social Development support staff and underscores why most coaches are not able to effectively meet all the needs (e.g. mentorship/father-figures; career development; social responsibility) of all the athletes.

Chaplaincy/ Church Audit: Spirituality and faith emerged as consistently important variables in the study. However, many participants noted that while they more actively engage in faith or church-related activities and attendance at home, they rarely (if ever) connected with faith communities while at school. These findings suggest that there is need to evaluate how greater access can be facilitated to culturally relevant faith communities/activities/mentors/faith leaders and chaplains for black male student athletes. Does your department or team have black chaplains or black faith leaders who are available and invited to speak and support the development of your athletes, particularly your black student-athletes? It should be noted that Christianity was the primary faith system noted by study participants, hence the reference to “church” in this descriptor. Still, responsible leaders will also consider and ensure that students who embrace faith systems other than Christianity feel respected, are able to access relevant spaces, and can flourish in this area of their personal development.

Cost Audit: How much would it cost you or your organization to do the requisite work? How much would it cost you or your organization if you do not do the work?

Competency Audit: Do you have the individual and institutional skill to engage this work? (see table below)

Commitment Audit: Do you have the individual and institutional will to engage this work? (see table below)
Dr. Ty-Ron Douglas (2015): A Model of Meaningful Student Engagement

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<th>The Will &amp; The Skill</th>
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<td>“I/we care about Black male student/athlete achievement and I/we possess urgency, capacity and clarity on how to engage individually and institutionally”</td>
<td>“There’s a lack of interest/engagement related to Black male student/athlete achievement but there are attendant resources that are not being utilized or recognized”</td>
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<td>“I/we care about Black male student/athlete achievement but I/we don’t know where or how to engage”</td>
<td>“I/we don’t know and I/we don’t care”</td>
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**Note:** This model can be used to consider your individual and institutional will and skill related to other student athlete demographics. Aspects of this model were inspired by the work of Dr. James L. Moore.

**The PACT: Transition**

Educators and practitioners who hope to support students *form* healthy identities and *flourish* into engaged students/citizens will attend to the variables below through intentional leadership, culturally relevant engagement, and innovative programming: triage (ongoing assessment of student need); talent (helping student responsibly manage his/her talent-based opportunities); trust (supporting students in developing trusting relationships with key stakeholders and the institution; this includes environmental variables and the recruitment, retention, and support of trusted leaders—particularly black male leaders); trauma (identifying and supporting students in areas of weakness and adversity); triumphs (helping students manage past and current successes); training (supporting students as they manage the physical rigors of college athletics); treatment (supporting students as they manage the physical and mental treatment services, including injury); truth(s) (understanding the belief systems, narratives, expectations and epistemologies of students, and helping them to account for the implications of their truth(s)); time (personal and organization time investment needed; accounting for the business of their schedules and how their playing time or lack there of may be impacting their experience). Each phase of this process is ongoing, ranging from organized and systematic approaches to organic and situational encounters and investments that emerge in any healthy relationship.
CAMPUS-LEVEL PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS

This study is part of a larger initiative designed to promote the holistic development of athletes nationally and at the University of Missouri. In particular, this study is part of a report on Black male student-athlete identity, leadership, and success at MU that has informed the continued development of Men4Men, Women4Women, and the Tiger Leadership Institute (TLI). TLI is a leadership development program that commenced in the fall 2015 to help shape Mizzou student athletes into productive leaders. Drawing on the theory of authentic leadership (George, Sims, McClean, & Mayer, 2007), TLI assists student athletes in identity development, discovering their authentic leadership style, and learning how to best impact, lead and empower those around them.

Findings from this study are being used to help MU Athletics personnel better understand the life histories and identity forming experiences of Black male athletes. Findings are being used to help MU Athletics better identify programmatic gaps and opportunities for working with athletes on identity development and leadership. Study findings are being used to develop best practices that are being shared with other NCAA and professional athletic institutions. For example, study findings suggest that black male student athletes at MU need more guidance and positive exposure related to class selection options, degree/major selection, and how their selections relate to potential life and career options. Additionally, the study supports the need for a triaging process that is partnered with ongoing mentorship and transitional support process at the beginning of a student-athletes university experience. For black males, it is vital that they have black male leaders, staff, coaches, and faculty that they can build trusting relationships with through these processes.

In the principal investigator’s work with Kim Bishop (Associate Athletic Director for Student Development at MU) and Dr. Greg Holliday to create TLI, we recognized that we cannot create a leadership program without acknowledging and addressing institutional blind spots that could affect Black male student-athlete involvement in the program: for example, we cannot ignore the
heightened national attention to issues like sexual assault, domestic violence, and drug abuse in college athletics that has disproportionately highlighted Black male athletes. This research is one step in a holistic process to better understand and develop our Black male student-athletes, and to engage a conversation about our current efforts in this regard.

Pat Ivey (MU Adjunct Professor and former Associate Athletic Director for Athletic Performance) and Kim Bishop served as collaborators on this study. Their expertise and leadership roles in Mizzou’s Men4Men, Women4Women, and the Tiger Leadership Institute initiatives have been invaluable in the study and in the utilization of the findings to enhance the aforementioned programs.

NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for national leadership, ongoing research, and programmatic innovation related to how issues of identity—particularly, how racism and racialized tensions are impacting the student, athlete, sport administrative, campus-level administrative and national sport and university level experience.

National and campus level training is needed for university administrators, coaches, and athletic department personnel in understanding and challenging systems of oppression (e.g. anti-racism training; implicit bias training)

Hiring and supporting the work of Scholar(s) in Residence/ Player Engagement/ Social Responsibility Scholar-Practitioners at the university athletic-department level—individual(s) should serve as a bridge between the athletic department, campus level departments, university/system administration, and national and international liaisons and scholarly literature. The individual(s) (and her or his team) should have research and programmatic expertise in the socio-cultural nuances of systems and society, with an understanding of how issues of identity and culture (e.g. race, social, gender, sexuality) affect student engagement and leadership on campus, and the lived experience and career development of students beyond campus. Scholar in Residence/ Player Engagement Personnel should become a resource to other professional networks and organizations that also serve student populations post graduation (e.g. Professional Sports Leagues and Directors of Player Engagement at those levels).

CONCLUSION

Study findings suggest one really cannot understand black male student athletes until you understand their families—this is inclusive of their immediate and extended families, but it also includes broader understandings of the black family experience historically, generationally, and institutionally. Said another way, one really cannot understand and appreciate a black athlete’s family if one has no context or understanding for how systems of oppression (including institutionalized racism) have significantly impacted racial, economic, socio-cultural and educational opportunities and disparities in the United States. Without a critical, compassionate, and comprehensive understanding in these areas, deficit-based approaches and perspectives are often the dangerous and damaging modus operandi of individuals and institutions—irrespective of good intentions. While it is true that we all have the power of choice, we must also understand
that choices are not made in a vacuum—choices are made from the context of the information (expectations) and opportunities (exposure; experiences; experimentation) that one is presented with, prepared for, and positioned to optimize and communicate (expression). This study supports the position that to effectively support black male student athletes in forming healthy identities and then flourishing in these ideas, there must be a healthy balance of individual and institutional accountability—a P.A.C.T. It is the position of this research team that the research, information, ideas, and innovative frameworks and programmatic initiatives shared above can serve as significantly important models of socialization and student engagement for all students, especially black male student-athletes.
REFERENCES


