

Unmasking Athlete Microaggressions: Division I Student-Athletes' Engagement With Members of the Campus Community

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The purpose of this study was to explore student-athletes' ($n = 122$) perceptions of discriminatory acts by professors and other students at a large Division I university in the western United States. The majority of respondents reported either positive or neutral experiences with other campus community members, but a small number described instances where professors and other students questioned their intellectual abilities, academic motivation, or treatment by the university. The author introduces the label "athlete microaggressions" to classify and validate the existence of insensitive and demeaning behaviors directed at student-athletes. The author identifies new directions for future work that builds on this research.

Keywords: microaggressions, student-athlete, faculty, engagement, athletics

For many decades, researchers and practitioners have been concerned with a range of campus climate issues that may affect Division I student-athletes' engagement and involvement in college learning communities. Many researchers, for example, have drawn considerable attention to student-athletes and the extent to which they experience a discriminatory campus climate influenced and perpetuated by significant members of the college community (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2010a; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007). Campus members can facilitate but also impede student desired outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2003), especially in the case of student-athletes.

A growing body of literature documents how members of the campus community view student-athletes in classroom settings (Edwards, 1984; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Comeaux, 2010a; Sailes, 1993). Faculty perceptions of student-athletes in particular have been quite unfavorable. Evidence suggests that faculty harbor more prejudicial attitudes toward both male and female student-athletes than toward their nonathlete peers (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995). Engstrom and colleagues (1995), for example, found that faculty members expressed a degree of surprise and suspicion when a male revenue or nonrevenue student-athlete received an "A" grade in their class. Faculty members were also more likely to report negative

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attitudes toward student-athletes who were provided with specialized academic tutorial services. Despite the centrality of positive student-faculty interaction to student success (Kuh, 2001), the relationship between faculty and student-athletes at Division I institutions has been complex and somewhat troubled over the years.

Black male student-athletes at Division I schools experience some of the most detrimental and deep-rooted racial stereotypes by other members of the campus community (Comeaux, 2010a; Edwards, 1984; Harrison, 1998; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; Sailes, 1993; Simons et al., 2007; Singer, 2005). Comeaux (2010a), for example, examined faculty perceptions of Division I Black and White college student-athletes' academic and postundergraduate accomplishments. Some White faculty subscribed to *racial coding*, or "an appeal to Whites' racial sentiments, carefully crafted so as not to arouse the suspicion that an explicitly racial appeal would raise" (Dyck & Hussey, 2008, p. 593). As such, they dismissed Black student-athletes as "affirmative action beneficiaries," innately intellectually inferior and not deserving of college admissions on their own merits. These negative perceptions are not limited to faculty; for instance, Sailes (1993) explored attitudes at Division I schools, and found that White and male students often believed that African American student-athletes were not academically prepared to attend college, nor were they believed to be as intelligent or receive grades as high as White student-athletes.

Similar to racial coding, *racial microaggressions* are subtle forms of racism scholars use to describe the commonplace verbal and nonverbal exchanges that convey racially charged messages to people of color. Pierce and colleagues (1978) defined *microaggressions* as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders" (p. 66). Too often, these subtle and sometimes unconscious exchanges are in fact viewed by perpetrators as harmless—even complimentary—although evidence suggests they cause psychological distress and evoke insidiously racist stereotypes linked in part to one's intelligence (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009).

Microaggressions do not always take the same form. Sue and colleagues (2007) identified three types of racial microaggressions: *microassaults*, or an explicitly racial, derogatory verbal or nonverbal assault; *microinsults*, or insensitive and subtle snubs linked to one's racial identity; and *microinvalidations*, or verbal or nonverbal actions that invalidate the experiences of people of color. Examples of everyday microaggressions encountered by people of color include: "When I talk about those Blacks. I really wasn't talking about you," "You're not like the rest of them. You're different," and "You speak good English" (Solorzano, 1998, p. 125).

As already discussed, Division I student-athletes face negative stereotypes about their characteristics and behaviors (e.g., Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995). They are rarely perceived as "highly intelligent" or as deserving other descriptors or related behaviors that suggest they have the capacity to achieve the highest levels of academic success (Comeaux, 2010a; Edwards, 1984).

Understood in this context, it is useful to examine how often and under what conditions college student-athletes in Division I schools experience microaggressions. Through open-ended survey questions, I explored student-athletes' experiences with professors and other students in classroom settings. Drawing

from the racial microaggression literature, in the current study, I use the term *athlete microaggressions* to describe subtle or overt, verbal or nonverbal exchanges (whether intentional or unintentional) which communicate negative and demeaning messages toward college student-athletes, regardless of race, gender, or type of sport. I introduce this term to label and validate the very existence of damaging, insensitive behaviors by members of the campus community that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In the next section, I briefly highlight the strenuous balancing act between sport demands and academic obligations to provide a general understanding of the challenges that Division I student-athletes face. Then, I present and discuss the student-athlete responses to open-ended questions about their experiences with members of the campus community. Finally, I outline new directions for future work to build on this study.

The Student-Athlete Balancing Act

At first glance, student-athletes may appear quite similar to their nonathlete peers in terms of their college experience. While both may enroll in full course loads, develop strong peer networks, and create rich on-campus lives, student-athletes also typically devote more than 40 hours per week to their sport (Wolverton, 2008). This creates tremendous demands, expectations and stresses outside of typical college life. In the modern era of intercollegiate sports, student-athletes endure the day-to-day demands of practice, extensive travel for competition, midweek games, team meetings, rehabilitation for nagging injuries, and mental fatigue. In many cases, college coaches have near complete power and control over the lives of their athletes, and as a result, student-athletes' ability to integrate fully into the academic and social systems of college is disrupted, and they may have difficulty fulfilling their academic obligations and goals (Eitzen, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Watt, 2001).

Creating an environment that strikes the proper balance between the academic and athletic lives of student-athletes can be a tremendous challenge for student affairs leaders. Support services have focused primarily on three main areas—academic scheduling, academic tutoring, and time management (Comeaux, 2010b; Shriberg & Brodzinski, 1984)—with the ideal goal of enabling all student-athletes to develop the skills necessary for academic, athletic, and personal growth and success. Despite the development and expansion of support services over the last three decades, student-athletes, particularly in the revenue-generating sports of football and men's basketball, continue to show lesser forms of academic success than their nonathlete counterparts (Eitzen, 2009). Blame is placed on numerous factors, from heightened commercialization and misplaced priorities in athletic departments to a lack of intervention strategies that maximize how students successfully participate in the athletic, social and academic systems of college (Comeaux, 2010b; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Eitzen, 2009). Although academic reform has been at the forefront of public discussion on college athletics, more research nonetheless is needed to better understand the kinds of purposeful intervention strategies that foster learning and personal development for student-athletes. Providing academic support services likewise does not address the fact that student-athletes are discriminated against in subtle ways. Therefore, any attempts to improve their desired college outcomes

have to take this into account. With all this in mind, this study seeks answers to the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do Division I student-athletes perceive their experiences with professors and other students in classroom settings?

Research Questions 2: To what extent do more subtle forms of discriminatory acts exist in student-athletes' perceptions?

Method

Participants

I conducted the research at a Division I public university in the western United States. The sample ($N = 122$) included student-athletes, ranging from first-year students to seniors. Of the participants, 66 were women and 44% were men; 66% self-identified as White, 28% as Black, and 6% fell into other categories, including American Indian, Asian American, Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, and other Latino. The university where the research took place has a history of academic prowess and athletic success. Graduation rates at this university are higher than the national average for both student-athletes and the general student population.

Data Collection

To recruit participants, a researcher met with a key internal stakeholder at the institution to obtain permission both to survey student-athletes in the department and to determine which sports might be willing to participate in the study. Ultimately, the coaches from several teams agreed to participate, and all student-athletes on these teams were asked to complete an online questionnaire during scheduled academic team meetings. On average, the questionnaire required approximately ten minutes to complete.

I employed a questionnaire developed by Simons and colleagues (2007) to examine how student-athletes viewed their engagement with the campus community. The questionnaire contained demographic items, as well as closed- and open-ended questions about student-athletes' experiences with other members of the campus community. The interrelated open-ended survey questions served as the primary source of data in this study. Student-athlete participants were asked to respond to such questions as: (a) describe an incident where you were singled out in class for being a student-athlete; (b) describe an incident where other students made comments to you about other student-athletes; and (c) describe comments that professors have made about student-athletes during class.

Data Analysis

Together with my research team, I conducted data analysis using content analysis, as suggested by Patton (2002). This systematic approach allowed us to identify specified characteristics of messages in an efficient manner. First, participant responses were read and reread to get a holistic picture of their answers to the open-ended questions, and to independently identify raw data themes within the transcripts. During this process, the research team regularly returned to the transcripts to make sure that the raw data themes were reflective of the participants' accounts. As

primary researcher, I then interpreted and identified major themes, locating commonalities and identifying support for the themes among the responses and across transcripts (Patton, 2002). At several points, I discussed the major themes with an independent researcher, who provided various recommendations for revising the themes. We eventually reached a collective agreement on the final themes. This approach illuminated patterns and trends in the qualitative data that were understood within a growing body of empirical research related to prejudicial attitudes and related stereotypes toward student-athletes.

Results

While the primary purpose of this study was to identify the types and contexts of everyday athlete microaggressions experienced by student-athletes, it important to note that the vast majority of student-athlete participants reported either positive or neutral experiences with professors and their nonathlete peers. This finding is noteworthy considering existing evidence that faculty and other students hold prejudicial attitudes toward student-athletes (Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995; Sailes, 1993; Simons et al., 2007). It is nevertheless very useful to explore those instances where student-athletes did report prejudicial attitudes among other members of the campus community, so that they remain isolated and rare.

In this section, I limit my focus to three themes that reflect the student-athletes' combined responses to the open-ended survey questions focusing on athlete microaggressions. These interrelated themes are illustrated with examples from participant responses. Certain identifying information is excluded from the quotations to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Stereotypic Assumptions About the Intellectual Abilities of Student-Athletes

Some of the student-athletes who participated in the research (7%) indicated that their professors held stereotypes about their intellectual abilities. These blatant stereotypic assumptions about student-athletes were expressed in classroom settings. For example, one student described when, "The professor stood up asking how many student-athletes are in class. When no one raised their hand, he said good, 'I don't have to slow down then.'" Another student-athlete listed numerous examples of how faculty perceptions were expressed: "Overall negative attitude... looks of disapproval when paired for assignments, professors speak slower and with similar words like we don't understand, etc." Some participants cited direct derogatory remarks about the intelligence of student-athletes during class. For example: "I had a professor who was very negative regarding student-athletes and was very insulting about it, saying that student-athletes were not very smart and that they usually don't do well in his class."

Stereotypic Assumptions About the Academic Motivation of Student-Athletes

A small number of student-athletes in this study (6%) reported that their professors and nonathlete peers held negative stereotypes about their academic drive. They recounted times when faculty or peers made comments indicating they did not

believe that student-athletes had the motivation to succeed academically. Often, these comments specifically pointed to students-athletes' need for additional time or support to complete assignments as evidence of their lack of academic drive. For example, one student-athlete commented:

I do recall someone in my class last year addressing the idea of how student-athletes claim to be "student(s) first" and then followed that statement up by saying how we have so many added benefits with free tutors and deadline extensions, and that we don't care about school and we are hand fed our education. I wanted to trade roles for just one day and then see how she feels about student-athletes.

Another participant noted: "I mostly heard students making comments directed at student-athletes and their general laziness." It was not only nonathlete peers who made expressed this type of attitude, however. Another study participant offered a comment about a professor that addressed the same issue:

A student-athlete was acting up in the back of the class (being a bit too loud) so the professor yelled at them and then stated, "all student-athletes are the same, they feel they don't have to work and their grades will just be handed to them."

Stereotypic Assumptions About Special Treatment Received by Student-Athletes

Very closely tied to campus perceptions of student-athletes' academic motivations are others' understandings of the additional services that they receive. Often, study participants who described athlete microaggressions described the (generally incorrect) assumptions about athletes' "special treatment"—overall, 9% of the participants made comments that reflected this theme.

One student-athlete expressed a very common sentiment among participants: "In one class I took my freshmen year, I heard a student talking to another student about how student-athletes get special treatment and how it's not fair." Another participant similarly noted, "one of the students in my class thought that being an athlete was so easy and we got tons of perks that made school easier." These comments typically centered around individual perks enjoyed by student-athletes, though they sometimes addressed broader concerns about institutional resources. For instance, one participant recounted how another student had "remarked how there was a helicopter drying the softball field and that was where all the university money was going—to athletics."

Discussion

In this study, I explored the types and contexts of everyday athlete microaggressions experienced by college student-athletes. Student-athlete participants in this study who reported microaggressive acts indeed were in the minority. Nevertheless, scholars note that it is important to document the voices of students and the subtle forms of inequality and discrimination that have the potential to affect important aspects of their quality of life, including mental and physical health (Constantine

& Sue, 2007; Solorzano, 1998; Sue et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009), trust in internal stakeholders, and overall sense of belonging in campus environments (Smith et al., 2007).

Some student-athletes in this study reported that their professors and nonathlete peers harbored stereotypical assumptions about them. Such microaggressive acts described by student-athletes called into question their intelligence. A professor's explicit remark about needing to "slow down" for student-athletes was rooted in the assumption that athletes generally lack the intellectual capacity to understand the course material at his routine teaching pace, even though student-athletes admitted to this institution have admissions test scores comparable to their nonathlete peers. This athlete microaggression is similar to what Sue and colleagues (2007) interpret as *microassaults*, and are likewise consistent with the literature on the "dumb jock" stereotype that student-athletes are generally inferior academically (Edwards, 1984; Sailes, 1993; Simons et al., 2007).

Similar to stereotypical assumptions about their intellectual abilities, there was also evidence of microaggressions regarding student-athletes' academic motivation, as peers and professors called into question whether education was a priority for them, or whether they were generally lazy. Student-athletes in some cases appeared angered and disappointed that they had to be exposed to hostile campus environments. One participant's desire to change roles with nonathlete peers is indicative of student-athletes' awareness that other students did not understand their dual roles of student and athlete, and in particular the tremendous demands imposed by their sport participation. In large measure, these stereotypical assumptions about the academic drive of student-athletes can have profound effects on student-athletes' well-being. Persistent and salient microaggressive acts like these have the potential to undermine student-athletes' best efforts in the classroom or even lead to self-fulfilling prophecies as faculty, other students, and student-athletes themselves assume low academic performance (Hamilton & Troiler, 1986).

Furthermore, a portion of study respondents reported that their nonathlete peers held assumptions about special considerations and privileges on the part of the university, mostly in relation to accommodations that made school easier for them. Beyond academic support services, this population of students did not receive resources and privileges beyond what was available to the general student body or other "students with special talents." Moreover, these student-athletes were held to the same scrutiny as their nonathlete peers for violation of university policies. As such, incorrect, stereotypical assumptions of this type can easily be classified as *microassaults* (Sue et al., 2007), lending support to previous research that found faculty members perceived both male and female student-athletes negatively when they were provided with specialized academic tutorial services (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011; Engstrom et al., 1995).

Conclusions and Future Directions

This study makes several contributions. While a relatively small number of student-athlete participants in this study described negative experiences with members of the campus community, discrimination against student-athletes in learning communities is a phenomenon that certainly requires greater attention. Unlike most studies that quantitatively explore the effects of negative stereotypes, the current study offers a

more nuanced and detailed understanding of these occurrences from the perspective of student-athletes. This study likewise further documents and classifies everyday athlete microaggressions in classroom settings, so that responsive intervention strategies can be more closely targeted. Taken together with a growing body of empirical research (e.g., Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Comeaux, 2010a; Sailes, 1993; Singer, 2005), the present findings indicate that it is necessary to take these isolated anecdotes seriously.

Student-athletes in this study reported that professors and their nonathlete peers held microaggressive assumptions about their intellectual abilities, academic motivation, and treatment received by their university. Similar to the use of the term “microaggressions” with race and gender, the label *athlete microaggressions* could serve as a marker—a call for further understanding, acknowledgment, and confirmation of the validity of subtle or overt forms of inequality and discrimination toward student-athletes. Until internal stakeholders understand the campus climate that student-athletes are asked to succeed within, they cannot possibly expect them to reach their full potential as students or as athletes. While a small portion of student-athletes expressed microaggressive acts, it is conceivable that they may share their stories with teammates and other athletes who might infer that similar remarks are being made about them, although more discreetly. As a result, the microaggressions reported by student-athletes in this study can take on greater significance than one might think. Student-athletes might interpret their campus climate as hostile, which, in turn, could impact their engagement in learning communities (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

While the current study was able to document microaggressive assumptions about student-athletes, it also had shortcomings. The data were obtained from one large, public, Division I institution, and the sample is not necessarily representative of all sectors of American higher education. Generalizations from this study thus should be made with caution and consideration of this limitation. Future research should include a diverse set of universities and colleges to determine whether there are variations by institutional type. Second, this study drew from student-athletes’ self-reports, and while researchers have provided validity evidence for this approach, all respondents may not use the same standards to respond to survey questions (Pascarella, 2001). As such, extending the research to additional campuses would also confirm whether these results are robust. Moreover, casting a broader net might allow new themes to emerge, thereby further advancing our understanding of how frequently and in what context student-athletes are faced with the types of athlete microaggressions described here.

It is important to note that while the findings from the current study suggest that some student-athletes experience athlete microaggressions in classroom settings, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether these experiences have affected their academic or personal development. While some studies have examined the impact of stereotype threat on academic performance (see Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan, 2009; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), future quantitative and qualitative studies that explore the effects of athlete microaggressions on a broad range of outcomes might be successful in answering such uncertainties. Finally, the extent to which student-athletes manage athlete microaggressions are critical to their learning and personal development. When student-athletes in this study were asked how they would respond in class to professors they felt treated

them negatively, 65.3% reported that they would work harder and 18.7% reported they would attend class but not participate. With this in mind, it is prudent not only to document how student-athletes manage and overcome stereotypical assumptions about their dual roles of student and athlete, but also how to develop effective coping strategies to protect them from a hostile campus climate.

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