Understanding Successful Learning Experiences of African American Male Student Athletes to Address Deficient Scholarship

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Abstract

This study explored the successful learning experiences of African American male student-athletes (AAMSAs) who participated in revenue-generating sports at Division I colleges and universities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand, from the perspectives of AAMSAs, their successful learning experiences, and those salient leadership experiences that influenced them. This study expands on previous qualitative research of AAMSAs by using appreciative inquiry as a philosophical approach to recognize their successful learning experiences. Five AAMSAs from Florida universities were interviewed to gather information about their learning experiences. A phenomenological hermeneutic analysis was used to determine the meanings of the participants' experiences. The research indicates that successful learning of AAMSAs is supported by high leader beliefs and expectations. Practical implications from these results reveal that exploration of different learning methods remains necessary for AAMSAs. The findings may provide methods that leaders may use to engender the successful learning of AAMSAs.

Keywords: leadership, PWI-HE, appreciative inquiry, Black student-athletes, critical race theory

Introduction

College sports is an economic engine that drives many industries, which reap the financial rewards from member institutions participating in intercollegiate athletics. Division I football and basketball are cash cows for many universities, and therefore are the face of top-tier predominately White institutions (PWIs) where these financial windfalls remain situated. In 2017, the NCAA reported $1.1 billion in revenue, of which most of those monies were derived from the Division I basketball tournament (Hill, 2019). Division I-A football teams averaged $30 million in revenues annually with the top programs generating $200 million. According to the department of education, $14.2 billion was generated placing these educational institutions compared to all professional sport leagues second to only the National Football League (NFL; Edwards, 2019) with over 30 institutions enjoying revenues upwards of $100 million (Hill, 2019).

Specifically, in Florida, the University of Florida (UF) topped the list with operating revenues in 2019 of $160 million, which ranked ninth among 227 NCAA Division I public schools. The only programs to turn a profit and help the university secure $17.9 million were football and basketball, which brought in close to $48 and $2.5 million, respectively. Florida State University (FSU) was second, generating revenues of approximately $152 million in 2019, which was enough to land the university a 12th place ranking among college football teams and first in its Atlantic Coast Conference. At FSU, football and basketball were the only two programs that made money in 2019. Football and basketball generated $71.5 and $15 million, respectively. Football generated more than $17 million in ticket sales and basketball was at $2 million. The University of Miami is another top tier university in Florida and is similar to both FSU and UF in athletics, but it is private and therefore the financials have not been made available. Although

individuals of all ethnicities participate in revenue-generating sports, for football and basketball at top-tier PWIs, African American male students constitute the highest percentage of athletes in these sports. In the Power Five athletic conferences, which includes 65 schools, Black males are only 2.4% of the undergraduate population, but they make up 55 and 56% of football and basketball players, respectively (Hill, 2019). They remain the driving force behind this economic system of exploitation, which the NCAA justifies through the label of amateurism (Suggs, 2009). However, their graduation rates remain the lowest out of other ethnic groups (Harper, 2018). The Power Five conferences nationally help to produce these inequities by placing more focus on revenue generating sports, and Florida-based schools are not absolved from these observations.

The NCAA's definition of amateurism obliges athletes to work without receiving a salary, prize money, or ongoing benefits. The aged argument remains that the athletic scholarship, which generally pays for room, board, books, meals, and tuition is adequate compensation (Custis et al., 2019). However, colleges bring in more revenue than they provide in scholarship benefits (Isidore, 2016). These profits are substantial for these institutions and the governing body of the NCAA, and yet a disproportionate number of Black males do not gain adequate scholarship from academia (Suggs, 2009). Scholarship is the search for truth that is transformative, which is necessary to improve a person's condition by knowledge, understanding, and discovering different ways to view oneself and the environment where one exists. It is rigorous and it transforms hope into reality (Oliver, 2009). Without gaining adequate scholarship from academia these individuals are denied the full benefit of the exchange for the athletic pursuits of being a student athlete. It is well documented in research studies that athletic success at PWIs continues to be prioritized over academic development (Cooper et al., 2017). It is incumbent upon leaders of these institutions to ensure the adequate learning of Black athletes, since they are being used for their athletic prowess (Beamon, 2009; Bimper et al., 2013). Therefore, member institutions should provide at least the exchange ensuring adequate learning exists. Singer (2008) postulated that participation rates, coupled with low graduation rates, signify that institutions receiving sizable financial benefits are not reciprocating with educational benefits for AAMSAs' athletic prowess; therefore, they are exploiting AAMSAs academically and athletically through NCAA and institutional structures.

There are numerous programs situated in colleges and universities that address these deficiencies, such as GPAs, graduation, dropout, and retention rates. Graduation rates along with other deficiency-based approaches, such as increasing grade point averages, reducing dropout, and increasing retention rates, continue to be popular ways to address the problem, but the issue remains because these approaches do not address lack of scholarship (Lapchick, 2011). However, an understanding of the successful learning experiences of AAMSAs through their salient leadership influences may be useful in providing guidance to leaders wanting to improve the scholarship of AAMSAs.

The research is evident that Black male athletes graduate at higher rates than non-Black male athletes; however, this is not true in Power 5 conferences (Harper, 2018). Therefore, Florida-based schools that are in the Power 5 conferences, such as UF, FSU, and UM should continue to address these concerns of assisting Black male student athletes with their scholarship of learning. This study focuses on those successful learning experiences understood by listening to the stories of former Black athletes who played Division I football at Florida-based schools. Therefore, qualitative research that provides information about successful learning experiences can be used by institutional stakeholders to assist AAMSAs with learning and sufficient scholarship.

Purpose and Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study was to investigate the successful learning experiences of Black student-athletes who attended a Florida based primarily white institution in higher education (PWI-HE)

and participated in Division I revenue-generating sports. The research question was "What are the successful learning experiences of African American male student-athletes and the salient leadership influences that support them?"

The study asked participants to identify factors that impacted their successful learning experiences for analysis and examination. Throughout, leaders were defined by participants, who have had an influence relationship (i.e., parents, educators, or coaches). Through this exploration, the goal was to gather data that might inform leaders in understanding methods that would ensure successful learning of Black athletes. In order to understand these conclusions, a conceptual framework was employed using critical race theory (CRT). CRT was necessary to illuminate the societal ills that Black student athletes face in society and subsequently at PWI-HE. The roles of leadership influences were analyzed through relational leadership theory. Lastly, appreciative inquiry was used as a philosophical approach to accent positive successful learning experiences of the participants.

Using CRT as a conceptual lens to view intercollegiate athletics asserts that only when ensuring that AAMSAs are learning is beneficial for leaders of PWI-HE institutions will they seek to advance an agenda that promotes educational achievement over athletic pursuits. Because those leaders benefit greatly, especially financially, regardless of athletes' learning, there exists minimal incentive to make substantive changes to their approach to the issue. (Geary, 2011; Hyatt, 2003; Woods et al., 2018). Interest convergence, steeped in CRT, asserts that European Americans in positions of power will only do those things that are in the best interest of African Americans when each of their interests converges (Bell, 1980). Therefore, European Americans in positions of power, through the lens of CRT, advocate for the advancement of people of color when serving their own self-interests (Harper, 2009). Change will only occur when the interests of AAMSAs converge with those interests of the PWI-HE leaders.

Relational leadership theory and its ontological and epistemological underpinnings also informed the conceptual framing of this study. Virtually all of the literature on leadership defines *leadership* as one person inspiring another to carry out assignments. Thus, leadership is an influence relationship. Leadership is further defined as the relationship between the leader and the follower whereby their roles are interrelated. Therefore, relational leadership theory in this context assisted in understanding the relationship between AAMSAs and the leaders they identified as providing them with salient leadership experiences (Yukl, 2010).

The appreciative inquiry (AI) process differs from problem-solving processes. In traditional problem-solving processes, problems and deficiencies are identified, the causes are analyzed, then solutions to those problems are introduced, and the plan of action is launched. Using AI as a philosophical approach for this study allowed the problem to be viewed from a different perspective (Drew & Wallis, 2014). Instead of taking a problem-centered approach, the problem was used as an opportunity to learn something positive about Black student athletes and their successful learning experiences.

Research Method

This was a phenomenological study designed to obtain a deep understanding of the successful learning experiences of AAMSAs and the salient leadership influences that supported them, through inductive qualitative methods. Phenomenology is a method that seeks to reveal the real meaning of people's individual experiences within a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Shenton, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2010). Before leaders can adequately address the lack of sufficient scholarship among AAMSAs, it is necessary to develop a more complex understanding of their perceptions with regard to learning. Therefore, the research question was, "What are the

successful learning experiences of African American male student-athletes and the salient leadership influences that support them?"

To understand the perspectives of AAMSAs, it was necessary to engage in dialogue with these individuals about their learning and the successful ways in which they learn. The qualitative analysis techniques applied here account for both their existing knowledge capital and how they acquired knowledge. In this regard, leaders can approach and develop learning methodologies that capitalize on the existing knowledge and experiences of AAMSAs that researchers have not yet explored.

Data Analysis

Member-checking was used to verify the validity of the data gathered from participants. The interviews were transcribed, and the data organized when moving from field notes and recorded interviews to transcripts to uncover themes that appeared in the data from the interviews. A complete and thorough description of the stories and the notes from the interviews were described in detail. Some of the initial themes were integrated with the more salient themes, whereas others were deemed marginal. The significant statements were compared within the context of statements by the participants' own experiences and the experiences of other participants.

The seven major themes presented provide an understanding, and the essence, of the successful learning experiences of AAMSAs and those leaders who influenced their learning. Those themes included belief, care, accountability, good environment, expectations, mentorship, and challenge.

I am a Black male, former Division I football player at a PWI. I recognize that as a social constructionist, my research methods are steeped in Denzin's (1978) approach to data triangulation. Triangulation allows one to saturate the data through various data collection methods, analyze the results, and present those results so one may understand the phenomenon (Fusch et al. 2018; Green et al., 2007; Shenton, 2004). This approach is vital since I recognize that through my experience, I bring bias to the research and therefore sought to mitigate those biases while gathering and interpreting the data from the participants.

Participant Voices

This section provides the findings from the interviews and presents the results of the analysis. The seven major themes presented provide an understanding, and the essence, of the successful learning experiences of AAMSAs and those leaders who influenced their learning. As the researcher, my aim was to extract words and phrases along with a series of events and activities, which would illuminate the meaning through this same inquiry. Table 3 shows the themes and subthemes that were extracted from the data.

Table 1. *Data Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Belief	
Care	Lack of Care; Support; Lack of Support
Good Environment	Foundation
Accountability	Consequences; Discipline;
Expectations	Low Expectations; Goals
Mentorship	
Challenge	

Theme 1: Belief

When discussing their leadership influences, the participants mentioned that the leaders whose efforts were successful getting them to learn believed in them. They discussed that the leader's belief in their ability to learn helped them to achieve a greater understanding and mastery of subject material. Often, the participants discussed that leaders' belief in their abilities propelled them to successful learning that was not evident before. The participants alluded to the notion that individuals and often leaders believed in their ability inside of sport or while participating in sport, but in academic settings, belief was nearly nonexistent.

Three of the five participants used the word "belief" in their responses when asked about their successful learning experiences and those salient leadership influences that supported them. At least one of the participants, Jason, regarded the influence of a leader's belief as more important than any other event in his life. To contextualize his thoughts on belief, Jason stated:

> My biggest example is I had a mother who believed in me. I was left back twice…I started school at 4 years old. I wasn't ready for it, so I repeated kindergarten…like I said, she believed in me. They told her, "This child is slow. Maybe he should be in special education because he just, he just doesn't get it…" I think looking back on things I probably suffered from ADD because I just had a hard time paying attention… I got through kindergarten, first, second, third grade, fourth grade…but in fifth grade, I started hanging out with kids from the public school that really didn't take education seriously… and my mother thought, "I'm not going to let my child fall victim to someone trying to classify him as being a special education kid…" My mother felt strong enough about me and believed in me enough to say, "You know, I'm going to sacrifice and put this kid in Catholic school." And to be honest, man, that was probably the best thing that probably ever happened to me in life. (J. Luck, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

Jason recalled a subsequent leadership experience whereby the leader showed a heightened level of belief in him, and this belief had a profound effect on his life. Jason was an engineering major in college, while playing football at the highest level of collegiate athletics, which was very demanding. He cautioned that he wanted to change majors and take a different career path. However, there was a person that he met by happenstance that kept him on track. Jason stated:

> [Being] an engineering student was tough. It was tough trying to be in good graces with football and academics. I had a tough time balancing. I remember one of my high school teammates went to the state college as well [and] was a year or two ahead of me. I was taking a business class. And he was like, "Hey, man, what are you doing over here?" I said, "I'm just taking this business class and I'm thinking about changing my major because, you know, engineering is hard. I don't know if I can finish it." He said, "Man, you better not quit. Do what you can, man, but don't quit. Just keep working hard. Man, you can get through it." And that lightbulb went off again. This guy believes in me. He thinks I can do it. I give him credit for helping me to stay the course and stay focused. (J. Luck, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

Jason and other participants described leadership influences whereby leaders, who stimulated their successful learning experiences, believed in the AAMSAs when the student-athletes did not believe in themselves.

The participant stated that often AAMSAs do not believe in themselves when it comes to academics, but they do when it comes to athletics. Coaches are more adept at getting them to believe in themselves inside of sport but instilling the belief in them that they can learn academically is not as evident. At PWIs, the same emphasis is not placed on learning or sufficient scholarship as on athletic pursuits and participation.

The characterization of belief by the first two participants and the third participant remains in slight contrast to each other. Often, athletes mention that coaches are great motivators and that they remain adept at bringing out the best in them through confidence and belief, but as noted, this same level of belief applied to learning scholastically by leaders seems to help bring out the best in them in that regard as well.

The researcher's discussion with other participants about their successful learning experiences brought up ideas of their past and current educators when reflecting on those learning experiences.

For instance, Tony explained that there has to be a level of belief by the leader. He said, "If you don't think that [AAMSAs] can achieve then they won't achieve. So, I think that plays a central figure." He further stated, "Teachers that have been successful in closing the achievement gap are those that believe that everybody can achieve and that everybody can learn" (T. Jackson, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

Theme 2: Care

In conversations with the participants, they tended to believe that leaders who facilitated their learning invested in them by spending time with and being attentive to their needs. Craig stated:

> Mrs. Johnson really used to sit down with me and tutor me after classes and…work with me in terms of how to write my papers, understand English, and do the research and research papers...Mrs. Johnson was real intricate. I felt like she cared about everybody. She said, "There is no dumb person in my class. There are only people that care about learning information and people who really don't care about learning information. But anybody in here, anyone in my class can achieve and learn and we all will achieve and learn." (C. Davis, personal communication, July 12, 2015)

Rick believes the care Dr. Ryan exhibited propelled her students to learn. He said that he had never had any teacher or administrator care about his learning the way Dr. Ryan did. He believed that she genuinely cared whether he not only passed classes but also excelled academically.

Rick further stated that he believed that Dr. Ryan cared for him because she showed a level of respect for him by listening to his needs and being accepting of his background and experiences. Rick believed that, in the learning environment, leaders often do not spend the necessary time with the Black athlete by listening to their needs or concerns, or by trying to relate to the circumstances or environments from which they come. He explained that the experiences of Black athletes are often discounted by leaders and educators. Subsequently, the Black athlete is pushed to the side and becomes despondent because of his experiences and environment. Rick explained that this lack of attentiveness and understanding is often thought of as a lack of respect and therefore is seen as a lack of care by Blacks. Rick stated, "The student[,]…the Black athlete[,] needs for the teacher in the class to just be respectful...Leaders have to understand that [respect] can translate to the classroom and make a student successful" (R. Robertson, personal communication, August 2, 2015).

This patience and time commitment by the leader showed that the leader cared. James believed that care is an action word that had to be shown through true commitment with time and patience being repeatedly demonstrated.

Subtheme: Lack of Care

The participants do not believe that leaders care the same way about their learning at PWIs. Some participants went as far as to say that leaders did not care if they learned, as it relates to academics. Tony believes that leaders at PWIs do not care about the student-athletes learning to

the extent that they care about sport participation and winning games. Although he cautioned that he does not think this institutional neglect exists at the same level it did many years ago when student-athletes were illiterate, he believes that there is not the same attention to learning that is given to athletics, stating:

> I've heard of athletes in the '70s and '80s who got to the NFL and couldn't read. Obviously, there was some concern…They did care if we were literate but, having said that, I think the emphasis was far greater upon athletics than it was upon studies. The push wasn't [to]…graduate college on time. You didn't meet in a room 10 o'clock at night to discuss your academics…you got [game] highlights, to see how you were going to win the next game, or to get more motivation to win a game. That was the numero uno [number one]; that was the goal. Now, if you picked up a degree[,]…wonderful. And thankfully I did. I picked up a degree, but it wasn't because I was pushed by the athletic department. I was given the resources…but I had to avail myself of those resources. I could have slipped through the cracks like most other Black athletes who came through because some people did need more support. (T. Jackson, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

The participants believed Division I colleges and universities do not focus on learning methods because the focus is on athletics and not academics. Craig stated, "Hey, they ain't got time to be trying to mentor your Black ass. They got TV contracts and all of that to worry about, man. If you can't keep up and can't get it[,]…you just basically lost" (C. Davis, personal communication, July 12, 2015).

Rick stated that from his experience, he believed that intercollegiate athletics is a plantation-like system. He said that these colleges and universities only care about sport participation. He stated:

> It makes me feel sad because it likens itself back to slavery and modern-day slavery that they are getting used to the extent that, you know, and I know the whole argument about you give them a free education bit, but they are getting used like slaves will get used. And the reason I say that is because slaves were given free housing and free food and that's pretty much what they are given because nobody cares about, and they really don't care about the rest of it…They don't care if [athletes] get an education; they just care if they can play for four years; it's the same thing in high school. They care if they can stay eligible enough to play four years and if you graduate, good; we want you to. But if you don't, you know, as long as you stay in healthy and get this 2.0 [minimum grade point average necessary remain eligible to participate in sports], barely slide by, you will be fine. (R. Robertson, personal communication, August 2, 2015)

Theme 3: Good Environment/Culture of Learning

The participants did not place the blame on the system but were critical of the environment from which they come. They mentioned that often within the African American culture, athletics are valued more than academics, which undermines efforts to develop more leaders who can provide those successful learning experiences for AAMSAs. A critical understanding of the lack of valuing education in the Black community may provide leaders with the knowledge that additional or altered support for AAMSAs remains necessary (Bertocchi & Dimico, 2014; Irving & Hudley, 2008). It will be necessary for public school systems to foster a culture of education in prepubescent years, so that AAMSAs can begin to value scholarship. However, Jason stated:

> So why are we [Black Americans] associating all of the superlatives with White people and not thinking that it's okay for us to master science and technology? Like, if Kendrick went out and had a 100-yard rushing game and, you know, he kicked six field goals or returned an interception, everybody would praise you for that great game you had. But

the same Kendrick, if he went and he made a 95 on his math test and he aced his English composition exam, I mean, you know, you would get ridiculed. "Oh, Kendrick, man, he think he smart." It's that mentality. And I suffered a little some of that at the public school. At the Catholic school, I didn't sense that. It was an environment where it was cool. People really respected the smarter kids in the class. And people looked up to those [smart kids]. And that rubbed off [on me] a little bit because I started seeing that, man, these kids are busting their butt to try to make an A and they are happy about it. They [were] happy about the fact that they aced this exam, that they made straight A's or whatever, you know? And I didn't come from an environment like that. (J. Luck, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

The participants believed that having a chance to see the positive effects of education engenders one to use it as a ladder to success. Some of the participants point to the plight of the members of the African American community looking to sports and entertainment as an easier entry point to success, which Craig referred to as a profession with a six-figure salary.

The themes uncovered by this phenomenological research are connected to those individuals who are leaders in the community and to whom AAMSAs can look to provide a culture of learning. However, as Craig stated, those leaders are not as prevalent in the African American community. In the private school that he attended, there was a difference in what he saw. There were those who could be mentors like parents, and the environment in general was in stark contrast to what he saw in the Black community.

The participants who did not attend the public school system noticed the difference in the environment of learning. They continued to note and expound on those differences as the keys to learning. Tony spoke of his environment while attending Catholic school. He stated that the environment saved him from being either in prison or not getting out of the environment in which he was raised. The essence of Tony's experiences, and other participants who attended private schools, highlights two discoveries: (a) They each recognized that their parents as leaders played an integral role placing them in environments conducive for learning; and (b) They each paid homage to those leadership influences that encouraged them to get out of their environment so that they could learn.

The leadership influences in an environment that is conducive for learning seems to propel this learning. James said that the best environment for learning for him was in the home having that support system from his parents.

Subtheme: Foundation

The participants believed that the good environment in which they were placed, supported by leadership influences, provided the foundation necessary for learning throughout the remainder of their lives. Thus, this good environment and the foundation are synonymous. Two of the participants who went to private schools used the word *foundation*, which became a sub-theme while recounting their experiences.

Jason stated that after his mother put him in private school during his elementary years, he had a foundation for learning. He believed that foundation set by his mother was the reason why his grades were better.

Jason further stated, "For me, I had people in my family that made it such that I could not, you know, not graduate. Not going off to college and [graduating] wasn't even an option for me." I asked Jason what "no options" meant for him. He said that almost his entire family, including his mother, had attended college prior to beginning their careers, so he believed that he had to follow that pattern (J. Luck, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

James said that the best environment for learning for him was in the home having that structured support system from his parents. He said that, ultimately, a lack of educational foundation is missing in the African American community in general, and not just with AAMSAs. He continued:

> It always goes back to the family. It goes back to the home. If you look at White families, [the] moms and dads, they are there, they are spending money[,]. They are spending time. If [our] kids are going to be successful, we're going to have to spend time with them. We're going to have to train them. We're going to have to mentor them. We're going to have to put a lot of effort. We're going to need to take them places. They are going to get experiences, and so [White families] get the advantage of getting to go different places, you know, again, moms and dads are there. And then I go to the African American community where mom, a single mom, has to work, and so the kid comes home, he's by himself and he has to almost raise himself. So, look, I can learn, [too, if] you give me the advantages that person has, let me get the experiences he has, you give me two people in the household teaching me stuff and bringing me stuff and doing stuff, man, we'll blow them out the water. So, it's never been can [African Americans] learn or can [African Americans] not learn. They ain't no smarter than us. It is not that at all. It is just we have to, we've got to reform the family. Moms, it's dads in the households teaching morals, it's teaching values, it's rolling their sleeves up, it is investing into these kids. I'm successful because my mom and dad were there for me. That's it. If you're raised in a broken home and you've got to try to figure it out. I mean, you were never taught and then you are, get married, [and] or whatever and you were never taught how to do it[,] you can't give what you don't have. But the cycle keeps going and going and going. It's just like, man, we've got to break the cycle. We've got to reform the family. (J. Blake, personal communication, August 2, 2015)

Theme 4: Accountability

Participants noted that when leaders made them accountable, they performed better. They provided evidence that when leaders made them responsible for their actions and set boundaries that they were more apt not to go beyond those boundaries. Participants revealed that they excelled and performed beyond expectations when they were held accountable for their actions. A lack of accountability resulted in participants underperforming based on acceptable standards held by leaders.

Tony believed that through his experiences, there were teams of people that kept him accountable to the stated objectives, especially academically. He believes that those same kinds of teams should be available for AASMAs to help them remain accountable to their educational objectives. Tony stated:

> I just think that motivation, that team effort of working with and keeping [student-athletes] accountable, meeting with and having sessions with that group that's assigned to you very often, [or] every month [asking] where are you? What are you doing? You know? Because they [AAMSAs] have the ability to learn, but they just need that support structure and I think most colleges have those resources to make this happen.

Theme 5: Expectations

The participants believed that expectations had to be set in order for successful learning to occur. Without expectations, students do not have a gauge as to what is necessary or attainable. Tony believed that his successful learning experiences correlated with his environment of being around people who look like him. He stated that leaders communicated those expectations in those

particular learning environments because each student was an African American male; thus, the excuses were mitigated. The students were from similar environments as well. Those circumstances, from his perspective, took the ethnicity and gender out of the equation. Tony stated:

> The expectations were high because everybody was like me. So, there was no faultiness when it came to expectations because a lot of times, particularly Black males don't achieve. As an educator myself, it has been duly noted that a lot of them just don't achieve because there are people who are impacting their education don't have high expectations for them. But because my expectations were on a level playing field with everyone who looked like me and were the same gender, you know, the sky was the limit. (T. Jackson, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

James stated that leaders should have high expectations to gain the desired results. Those expectations should be set high for everyone. He said, "Yes, set the expectations high, set the standards high" (J. Blake, personal communication, August 2, 2015). However, James cautioned that the way in which one communicates those standards dictates the results. He stated that some leaders are adapted to cursing and some to encouragement. He noted that his successful learning experiences were through encouragement, but those leaders continued to challenge him to get the best from him.

Tony, in expressing his reflective thoughts about his successful learning experiences believes that teachers should have high expectations for students. He said, "I mean, those expectations are what drives your desire to impart wisdom and to impart knowledge and understanding" (T. Jackson, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

Theme 6: Mentorship

The participants indicated that mentorship was important, and they introduced two distinguishable types of mentors. These were: (a) individuals with whom they could most identify, namely another Black male; and (b) parent figures. The participants concluded that their successful learning experiences included someone that they could draw guidance from, and both of these were salient.

The participants alluded to not having mentors to guide their educational pursuits may have hampered their learning. Conversely, mentors are necessary to help steer AAMSAs in the right direction, especially academia. Tony stated that he had those mentors or reference points to draw from, which would provide the leadership influences necessary for his successful learning.

Theme 7: Challenge

The participants believed that expectations should be high. Therefore, in their past successful learning experiences, those leaders challenged them.

As he recalled the learning experience from an influential leader, he indicated that he believes that his teacher thought differently about African American male students because she was from a different culture (from the northern U.S.). The researcher did not go into detail as to what he meant as the differences between the Northern and Southern mentality because that was outside of the scope of the researcher's study, but regardless, his experience was predicated on this belief at least in part.

The participants recounted that the challenges of those leaders were necessary for their successful learning. James stated that when it came to his learning that his parents did not allow him much slack to underperform. He stated, "My parents were tough on me" (J. Blake, personal communication, August 2, 2015). When speaking about athletics and his learning experience in

that arena, he stated that the person who helped him the most was someone who continuously challenged him.

Jason stated that when he went into the private school in his elementary years, teachers challenged him to compete with the other students, and that created a positive learning experience. He said that he did not realize it until later in his adult life that the challenges which his mother, whom he identified as a leader, placed in front of him assisted in his ability to learn. In attempting to understand the challenges of the private elementary school, the researcher asked him if he believed the idea of a challenge assisted in his learning:

> Yeah, well, I would say to be honest it taught me basically how to compete. You know, how going to school with these rich White kids and seeing, you know, basically the type of family structure, the support that they had. And, you know, we're all sitting in the same classroom trying to learn the same thing. So for me, I was trying to compete with them. I mean, I was starting to feel empowered, like, "Okay, it is cool to be smart."

> You know, kids are, "You are trying to act like you're White, man." And this is the one problem that I have with Black folks when we classify people as trying to act White. If you look at it in the grand scheme of things, you're trying to master science and math, I mean science and math don't have a color, right? I mean English—English doesn't have a color, right? (J. Luck, personal communication, July 10, 2015)

Results

The seven significant findings that arose from the data analysis were based on in-vivo descriptions of the AAMSAs' experiences at Division I, predominately PWIs who participated in the revenue-generating sports of football or basketball. All the participants spoke candidly of their successful learning experiences and the salient leadership influences that supported those experiences. Each of the participants graduated from college and participated in intercollegiate athletics for at least four years. They had similar experiences, and the themes and subthemes became salient through careful reflection and induction. As each recalled their experiences, they discussed the processes of those relationships with leaders who supported those successful learning experiences. The extant literature on leadership describes it as a process that inspires others to stretch beyond previously believed boundaries (Yukl, 2010).

A review of the data collected revealed that the participants recounted processes of relationships. The research focus extended beyond formal roles of leaders (e.g., coach, teacher, parent, mentor, and brother), but included dynamic processes of leadership that were present, which assisted in successful learning.

The participants recounted experiences more than in those capacities as formal leader/follower relationships, but more to the co-construction of those interconnective leader/follower contexts. AAMSAs recalled leaders who addressed their learning problems and assisted in more successful learning patterns. Relational leaders recognize the importance of being responsive to the present moment in organizing, problem-solving, and communicating (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Pearce, 2007). They were inspired to believe in themselves and stretch beyond previous capacities of learning. These relational leadership constructs introduced communication patterns that prompted the participants to believe in themselves. Often, the participants stated that leader belief in their abilities propelled their learning. Additionally, leader care for participants could be attributed to their successful learning.

Because relational leadership theory is concerned with how the actors (e.g., participants and leaders) engage and negotiate with each other, these learning examples fit. The themes identified by the participants were evident in their academic learning. However, none of those themes

existed when discussing whether leaders of PWIs cared for their learning. The participants recalled that leaders at PWIs mostly did not care nor did they support their academic learning. Leaders at Division I PWIs were relational in their approach to leadership during sport participation, but not for the AAMSAs' sufficient scholarship or academic learning. AI was an appropriate philosophical approach to this study because the participants did not harbor ill will toward the institutions that did not engender their successful learning. Those instances, whereby successful leadership influences were salient and leaders believed, cared, placed them in a good environment, held them accountable, had high expectations, mentored, and challenged them, brought life to the participants, especially their learning. All the participants discussed that these leaders showed an appreciation for their backgrounds and their previous life experiences.

The participants each stated that PWI-HEs are not intent on assisting AAMSAs with learning or gaining sufficient scholarship, but rather that successful sport participation remains the goal. One participant said that the relationship was mutually exclusive, meaning that they each were entering into the agreement, knowing the goals that each wanted to accomplish. Although 'student-athlete' is the moniker presented, from the participants' perspective, there remains more of a focus on athletics than learning as a student. Leaders should be attentive to AAMSAs' learning needs. A lack of proper attention to the needs of AAMSAs by leaders leads many to conclude that they are being used for athletic abilities while not getting proper support for their learning or sufficient scholarship (Dunn & Jones, 2012).

Discussion

The research effort using critical race theory as a conceptual lens sought to highlight those ills of society through marginalized individuals in which race is the predominant factor. However, a review of the data suggests that these individuals appreciate being challenged, disciplined, and held to a high standard in academia, as well as in sport.

As AAMSAs recounted their learning experiences, they explained that leaders, who were responsible for their successful learning, used different teaching methods and techniques, which propelled their learning. Therefore, leaders should be adept at understanding that these individuals may learn differently and that alternative teaching methods may be necessary for assisting with their learning.

There is a stereotypical assumption that everything about AAMSAs is less important than their sport participation, including their experiences and their ability to learn. They are considered gifted in sport but inferior in many other aspects, especially their ability to learn (Hawkins, 2010). Often, many of the stereotypical negative experiences of AAMSAs, including the environments in which they were raised, family structure (i.e., single-parent homes), and their past economic conditions are considered detrimental. From a review of the data and the focus on building successful athletic programs, AAMSAs' life experiences are often marginalized, and they are encouraged to disassociate themselves from those experiences. However, instead of discounting those experiences, those who apply adult learning theory methods remain adept at embracing the experiences of AAMSAs because AAMSAs identify themselves by those experiences.

The selected participants provided a context of understanding that successful sport participation was the goal or the standard of those universities, not successful learning or sufficient scholarship. However, none spoke as victims of a racist or discriminatory system from my review through the lens of critical race theory, but did recognize the inadequacies of Division I PWIs. The participants each said that they understood the overarching goal of these PWIs and their own contractual obligation to participate in sport, and that sport participation, often at the expense of gaining adequate scholarship, remained most important. However, although the participants

understood the institution's focus, they agreed that this does not absolve leaders of the institution of their duty to ensure adequate scholarship or successful learning by AAMSAs.

Finally, if leaders of institutions become interested in AAMSAs' learning and gaining sufficient scholarship, even beyond traditional outcomes, such as graduation success rates, retention, or higher grade point averages, then the learning and knowledge of successful leadership influences of AAMSAs may be useful. Although the sample size is too small for the study to be generalized across PWIs, the information is transferrable.

Implications for Study

Relational leadership theory, along with an appreciative inquiry approach to understanding the phenomenon, helps to see the best in the participants while understanding the relational attributes that facilitate their learning. AAMSAs' past experiences should be appreciated and used for sufficient learning and not extricated. This study's central focus has been AAMSAs; however, because the participants spoke of their successful learning experiences separately from those experiences inside of sport, it is possible that these findings can be transferred to African Americans in general.

Each participant not only spoke through the lens of an athlete but also saw problems with learning or willingness to learn as systemic within the African American community. The findings help to suggest that those instances in which African Americans lag in academia may be caused by leaders' (e.g., coaches, teachers, mentors, or parents) deficiency in one of the thematic findings identified.

Themes most salient to the research were belief and expectation. Leaders' high belief and expectations fostered successful learning. AAMSAs attending PWIs should be held to higher academic standards than the minimum passing grades to remain eligible. They should be required and expected to gain scholarship above and beyond minimum grade point averages and degree completion. Their scholarship should include the use of their existing knowledge capital and an appreciation of their experiences and backgrounds. AAMSAs who participate in revenue-generating sports at PWIs have unique experiences, pressures, and demands (Hawkins, 2010). Given that the main focus of Division I PWIs is winning, AAMSAs often do not believe that they receive adequate attention outside of sport participation, especially as it relates to their academics. African American male students are less likely to feel motivated to invest in school when they do not feel as if the teachers care about them (Lynn et al., 2010). Therefore, it may be beneficial for key stakeholders to show AAMSAs that they care about their total welfare even outside of sport participation, which may propel them to gain sufficient scholarship.

Florida-based institutions should lead the way in the development of programs that address and fill the voids that colleges and universities leave when focusing on athletic revenues more so than academic acumen. Therefore, the findings from this research, which revealed the successful learning experiences of AAMSAs, can be a guide to develop and improve on existing educational structures to meet the prevalent academic needs of AAMSAs.

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