Like all other student athletes, women and students of color have the challenges and rewards that come with the dual roles and identity of student and athlete. Yet neither can escape the limitations that come with so-called minority status. This chapter addresses the experiences of these growing populations in higher education.

Female Student Athletes and Student Athletes of Color

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Athletes who are women or students of color—or both—like other college athletes, play the dual role of student and athlete. However, these two groups also share the distinction of being two of the most visible of historically underrepresented groups in higher education. As a result, they inherit the status of minority, which can affect their perceptions of themselves and the perceptions of others. For example, in a recent study at Brown University, black student athletes reported being stereotyped and prejudged due to their skin color and their student athlete role (Silverman, 1997). These students perceived that professors and peers assumed that they were at Brown only because of their athletic talents, not their academic abilities.

Student athletes of color and female athletes are breaking ground in American higher education. It was not until the mid-1960s that students of color began to enroll in larger numbers at colleges and universities, and student athletes of color began to become more visible in sports. Before the 1970s less than 40 percent of girls participated in high school athletics; more recently, over 50 percent of high school girls participate in sports (Duquin, 1995). The NCAA reported that in 1999, 145,832 women participated in...
collegiate sports; the numbers of athletes of color were not reported (NCAA Championship Sports Participation, 2000). Farrell reported in *Black Issues in Higher Education* (1996) that 61 percent of all basketball players at the Division I level were black, and 1.6 percent were Latino. He also reported that 52 percent of Division I football players were black and 1.8 percent were Latino. In baseball, 6.9 percent were black and 4.1 percent Latino. About 82 percent of all women in Division I were white.

Public interest in college sports and athletics has been noted in preceding chapters. This interest, as well as other issues, have increased pressures to recruit academically qualified female athletes and athletes of color to predominantly white institutions. New NCAA rules and regulations for eligibility to participate require higher standards than a decade ago (1999 NCAA Graduation Rates Summary, 2000). The combination of these trends calls for discussion and clarification of the needs of female athletes and athletes of color. Much literature on female athletes and athletes of color focuses on implications of Title IX on athletics, and retention and time to degree completion. At present, there is little literature on student athletes of color who are not African American.

It is important to note that not all female athletes are white and not all athletes of color are male, so as we move forward in this chapter we will distinguish issues for female athletes as well as male and female athletes of color. Experiences shared across the groups, however, are pressures to win and achieve.

**Female Student Athletes**

Opportunities for women to participate in athletics have increased since the 1970s as a direct result of the federal government’s passage of Title IX, originally a part of the Public Education Act of 1972. Under Title IX, “institutions are required to provide equal opportunity to participate and to equally effectively accommodate the athletics interests and abilities of men and women” (Bonnette and Daniel, 1990, p. 1). The statute requires equal resources and financial support, regardless of the sex of the athletes involved.

Before Title IX, less than 1 percent of the money spent on collegiate athletics went to women, so the requirements of the new law made for immense changes in funding. Women’s participation in college sports “has gone from 32,000 in 1972 to 110,000 in 1996. . . . Women now share approximately 24 percent of the operating dollars spent on collegiate sports” (Sklover, 1997, pp. 12, 14).

Title IX not only increased the numbers of women participating in college sports, it also raised the level of competition. Additionally, women athletes have often been stereotyped as lesbians (Blum, 1994), and they have experienced backlash and resentment due to Title IX (Greenlee, 1997). These negative stimuli, along with increasing numbers and competition, have contributed to noticeable increases in eating disorders, nutritional concerns, sport-related injuries, and sexual harassment.
Eating Disorders. Tens of thousands of women are dealing with eating disorders. These can take many forms, ranging from chronic dieting to bulimia (purging, by vomiting or using laxatives, after eating) and anorexia (eating too little food to sustain healthy functioning). Once thought to be a “problem of the wealthy, eating disorders are now considered to be common in all racial, social, and economical levels” (“What Is Behind Eating Disorders,” 1999, p. 3). Powe-Allred and Powe (1997) note, “Young women of today are bombarded with what the media and advertisers feel is the ‘ideal woman’” (p. 53).

Female athletes have many of the personality traits found among young women with disordered eating: intense discipline, desire to excel, strong focus on body and looks, undue concern about adult opinions. “Perfection, control, and discipline are traits belonging to both those with eating disorders and to athletes. There is a very thin line between being an athlete and being an anorexic. Too many athletes put too much focus on, ‘If I’m thinner, I’ll be better.’ There’s no evidence to support that” (Hawes, 1999, p. 24). In addition, female athletes tend to be judged by higher standards of appearance than male athletes are (Powe-Allred and Powe, 1997).

Recent research (Johnson, 1999) confirms not only that eating disorders plague female student-athletes but also that the pursuit of unrealistically low levels of body fat is unhealthy. “Women whose body fat drops below 17 percent are at risk for amenorrhea (infrequent or no menstruation) and, in time, osteoporosis (low bone density)” (Johnson, 1999, p. 179). The term female-athlete triad was coined in 1992 by a group of sports scientists and doctors (Hawes, 1999, p. 24) to describe three conditions often found together: disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis. These problems often begin in high school, but, because few high school administrators have heard of the female-athlete triad, there is very little education available for parents and female athletes. In addition, many high school athletes displaying this pattern go on to college. Hence it is important that student affairs professionals be aware of this syndrome.

Nutrition Concerns. The high activity level of athletes requires proper food intake and attention to meeting nutritional requirements. It is difficult, however, for college athletes to develop and maintain healthy eating habits. Although athletes want to do everything they can to be successful in their sport, their schedules, which often include early morning weight workouts, classes, study, and afternoon practice, can leave little time for eating balanced meals. Having a nutritionist on staff can be a valuable part of a team approach to dealing with athletes with eating disorders. “As research continues to reveal the impact nutrition can have on sports performance and injury prevention, athletic administrations will view sports nutrition from a financially beneficial perspective” (Clark, 1994, p. 135).

Sport-related injuries. Sport-related injuries for women are an increasingly important factor in the growing world of women’s athletics. In the sports of soccer and basketball, women incur more knee injuries than men do. Although it is “widely accepted that musculoskeletal injuries are largely
sport specific and not sex specific” (Arendt, Angel, and Dick, 1999, p. 86), the differences in the number of injuries, including severe knee injuries, among men and female athletes who participate in jumping and pivoting sports has recently come under review. Female college basketball players suffered anterior cruciate ligament injuries during practice at twice—and during games at five times—the rate of male basketball players (“Knee Surgery Down,” 1998). “The consensus of the nation’s leading physicians in sports medicine is that the problem is going to get far worse before it gets better” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 68).

**Sexual Harassment.** Media coverage of women’s athletic events, individual TV interviews, pictures in media guides, posters, and newspapers, and university and individual Web sites are examples of the increasing public interest in women’s sports. This visibility can lead to unsolicited attention from strangers via telephone calls, letters, e-mail messages, and, in some cases, stalking.

Shared athletic facilities, such as weight rooms or practice fields, also can create a hostile environment for female athletes. To assist students in understanding the institution’s values regarding sexual harassment, student affairs professionals and athletic administrators should be educated about these issues and clearly communicate expectations and resources to male and female athletes. In-service training can focus on these issues to better equip and educate professionals who can be allies and advocates for change.

Finally, as female athletes make the transition to life after college, it is important to note the changing face of athletics for women due to an increase in opportunities for post-college play. Women have had professional leagues in tennis (WTA) and golf (LPGA) for many years. In the late 1990s, two basketball leagues were created, the ABL (which has since disbanded) and the WNBA. Other team sports that have been developed for women are the Silver Bullets baseball team, a professional softball league, and a pending soccer league. Colleges (especially in Division IA) need to include women in their professional sports counseling programs for athletes considering the feasibility of “going pro” to help them explore the financial implications and assist them in selecting an agent.

Student affairs professionals should be trained to understand the process of turning professional while in college or after completing a degree. We should not leave this exclusively to the athletic programs, as we have a responsibility to partner with these units to provide students of both sexes—and their families—with much-needed support and assistance in this process.

In summary, the student affairs professional can serve as an advocate for women student athletes and assist and support them in their overall development. The charge for student affairs professionals in the next decade is to be integrally involved in supporting these athletes in their holistic development despite the barriers found in higher education and athletics.
Student Athletes of Color

Most literature available on this topic focuses on African American athletes. Little has been written about Latino, Asian, or Native American student athletes.

Student athletes of color, like other athletes, spend a significant amount of time, both in and out of season, involved in athletics and related activities. Edwards (1990, cited in Sperber, 1990) reported that the amount of time athletes spend in their sport can decrease motivation to study due to exhaustion and pain from participation in sports. Issues that are particularly challenging for student athletes of color are social and academic integration, performance pressure in their sport, and racism and sexism on campus (Person and LeNoir, 1997).

African Americans constitute the largest proportion of students on college athletic scholarships (“Vital Signs,” 1993–1994). Although scholarships allow the institution to attract high-quality athletes, this does not guarantee that the athletes will graduate. According to a 1993 poll conducted by USA Today, twenty out of twenty-five of the top basketball schools graduated less than half of their black athletes (“Vital Signs,” 1993–1994). Duke University, University of North Carolina, George Washington University, Seton Hall University, and Vanderbilt University awarded diplomas to over half of their black athletes. At many of the historically black institutions, students on athletic scholarships graduate at a higher rate than students in general (“Vital Signs,” 1993–1994).

Student athletes often have unmet academic needs (Ethier, 1997; Nathan, 1998; Naughton, 1997; Schubert and Schubert, 1983). This phenomenon is even more acute among highly sought-after minority student athletes (Renick, 1974; Anderson, 1990; “Achieving Gender Equity,” 1997; “Vital Signs,” 1993–1994). Minority student athletes enter college not only struggling as other athletes do to maintain their academic performance and athletic commitment but also struggling to convince their professors that they are serious students (DeFrancesco and Gropper, 1996).

Efforts have been made in the counseling of student athletes of color to assess their needs and the needs of students of color in general (Petrie and Stoever, 1997). Models for counseling student athletes focusing on involvement of coaches and athletic student services staff have been identified (Cogan and Petrie, 1996; Hinkle, 1994; Chartrand and Lent, 1987; Person and LeNoir, 1997).

A Culturally Responsive Approach to Working with Student Athletes. A culturally responsive approach advocates a holistic perspective in serving students. It includes knowledge of cultural dynamics and knowledge of how ethnicity, race, and power influence human functioning. Coleman (1987), Cross (1991), Pinderhughes (1989), Priest (1991), and Sue (1981) have discussed attributes and skills of cultural competence. Five elements of
cultural competence are particularly useful in addressing the special needs of female student athletes and student athletes of color, and can also serve as a framework for effective delivery of student services in general.

The first element of cultural competence is acknowledging cultural differences and becoming aware of how these differences affect helping. Student affairs practitioners should recognize that opportunities to interact with students from a broad range of cultures is the norm in today’s higher education, yet we have a responsibility to support every student in our community. There should be more than one office, one person, one place where students from diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and talents can feel a connection and support. Someone who is struggling to balance the roles of athlete and student of color will often seek support from a student affairs professional. We need to understand how to help the student find ways to engage in the cultural community for strength and support. This is a serious issue and could easily be dismissed if one does not acknowledge the importance of culture for many students of color.

The second element of cultural competence is fully appreciating cultural differences. As a place to begin, student affairs practitioners must recognize the influence of their own cultural background on how they act and think. Such awareness is necessary to assist students as they cope with issues of exclusion because of their race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background. What are the issues for the athlete of color who feels that skin color is evoking treatment different from that received by others on the team? What are the issues for the athlete who cannot hang out with the team after practice for lack of extra money?

A third element of cultural competence is understanding the dynamics of differences. Student affairs practitioners must understand that many of us fear difference and this fear is manifested in a variety of ways. What are the dynamics that maintain distance and what are the dynamics that bring a sense of shared understanding? Answering these questions on a personal level leads to increased comfort with differences.

The fourth element of cultural competence is understanding the meaning of behavior within a cultural context. Conducting in-service activities that encourage staff to periodically engage in values clarification in relationship to students served is essential. Also, staff should engage in discussions about the values of students from a cultural perspective and become increasingly aware of the differences and similarities.

Finally, the fifth element of cultural competence is knowing where or how to obtain specific cultural information. Learning about students’ history, values, traditions, family systems, immigration patterns, rituals, celebrations, and language are all part of the culture and should be incorporated into knowledge-based in-services complemented by field trips, cultural excursions, and video technological supports.

As student affairs practitioners we must become culturally responsive and move toward the development of a culturally responsive approach to
working with student athletes. The five elements outlined by Cross serve as a foundation for learning and using specific models to assist in holistically serving students.

**Male Student Athletes of Color.** Black males participate at a higher percentage level than students of all other backgrounds in basketball and football (Farrell, 1996). Latinos are represented in very small percentages in these two sports, and most represented in baseball.

In a study of African American male athletes, Person and LeNoir (1997) stated that one out of nine African American students at predominantly White four-year institutions was an athlete. Half of the football and basketball players came from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Most athletes came from homes headed by women and many were first-generation college students. Issues and concerns for these athletes were the negative stereotypes and expectations associated with student athletes and men of color.

Part of African American male athletes’ experience is emotional shifts that occur as a result of moving from being the superstar in high school to being part of a crowd in their sport and in the classroom. These transitional ebbs and flows can contribute to the student’s feelings of self-doubt, abandonment, and isolation (Funk, 1991). Issues of race and class discrimination are factors that can lead to campus isolation, which can then result in adjustment problems for the male athlete of color (Smedley, Meyers, and Harrell, 1993). Dealy (1990) reported that black male athletes experience depression related to racism and discrimination. These feelings can negatively affect performance in the classroom and on the field.

If a group of people are portrayed in negative ways, those images are internalized from a group and cultural perspective. Members may feel pain associated with identification with the group and the constant bombardment of negative images such as the stereotype of the “dumb jock.”

All is not negative, however, in the life of African American male athletes. Many advantages come with being an athlete of color. These students often receive financial support for their education, are highly visible, and are involved in the institution. When these students receive effective individualized advising and other support services that are sensitive to their status as student athletes of color, they are able to meet both the rigor and demands of their academic program and athletic responsibilities (Person and LeNoir, 1997). Programs such as CHAMPS (Challenging Athletes’ Minds for Personal Success) that teach life skills for athletes, transition programs, and mentoring programs provide developmental support and assistance.

In many cases, nonathletes of color value their student athlete peers and reach out to include rather than exclude them from cultural programs and social activities (Person, 1989). It is important that these students are supported in developing and nurturing relationships with other students of color for support and community. For some students this will be more important to their satisfaction and integration on campus than for others.
Professionals should assess the level of cultural identification a person has with a particular cultural group and assist the individual in working with issues of cultural pain or positive cultural identification.

**Female Athletes of Color.** Limited information is available about student athletes who are women of color. Research in this area is needed so that we can serve these students to the best of our abilities, providing them with support, assistance, and relevant services and programs.

A major issue affecting female athletes of color is the lack of role models. This concern, combined with high visibility, can create stress and anxiety. Student affairs professionals can serve as a sounding board and source of support for female athletes of color when they need to develop coping skills to negotiate the stress in their lives. Increasing the number of role models for female athletes and encouraging women student athletes of color to engage in the full experience of college life is critical.

**Conclusion**

Female athletes continue to have to legitimize their athletic participation in the face of sexism. Student athletes of color, particularly African American male athletes, also face a community that might value them as athletes but yet not welcome the general African American male student population. These tensions add stress to the general pressures already present within the student athlete experience.

Female athletes and student athletes of color are juggling multiple identities and roles as they strive to succeed. Part of our responsibility as student affairs professionals is to support student athletes in managing internal and external conflict related to these identities and roles. Gaining the skills outlined in the culturally responsive approach can be very useful in serving these students. In addition, student affairs professionals should use the expertise and skills gained through their multiple roles and levels of interactions with students to become leaders on campus in advocating and supporting student athletes of color and female student athletes.

As experts in student development, cultural competence, and organizational change, student affairs practitioners are in an excellent position to collaborate with faculty, athletic and academic administrators, and students to create inclusive and celebrative environments for student learning. Collaborative efforts could begin with prospective students, introducing them to the academic life of the college before they begin their athletic life.

**References**


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