

# A HIDDEN TOXICITY IN THE TERM “STUDENT-ATHLETE”: STEREOTYPE THREAT FOR ATHLETES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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## INTRODUCTION

College athletes represent a unique and “non-traditional” group of students on a college campus. More so than most traditional students—namely, those who do not participate in college athletics—athletes are part of a complex social and political system within the university. They attend college in part to excel at the highest amateur level of their sport, but according to National Collegiate Athletic Association (“NCAA”) regulations, college athletes must maintain “academic eligibility” to play their sport. This requires college athletes to enroll in at least twelve semester units, declare a major, maintain a cumulative grade-point-average of 1.8 or higher, and make academic progress toward a degree.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, college athletes face certain pressures that most traditional college students do not. Understanding the nature of these pressures, examining how they affect the performance of college athletes in the classroom, and finding ways to help college athletes cope with the burdens placed on them are critical to ensuring the long-term success of this unique group of college students.

One pressure facing college athletes relates to the negative stereotypes that faculty, traditional students, and administrative personnel hold about them. The most prevalent negative stereotype of college athletes is that of the “dumb jock,” which

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1. NCAA, *Remaining Eligible: Academics*, NCAA.ORG, <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/NCAA/Eligibility/Remaining+Eligible> (last visited Jan. 25, 2012).

characterizes athletes as less intelligent, motivated, or prepared for college courses than traditional students.<sup>2</sup> Most people on campus believe that college athletes take easy classes, choose undemanding majors, and benefit from athletic privileges such as free tutors and free apparel.<sup>3</sup> They also believe that athletes are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, cheat on exams, and receive leniency in grading in order to remain eligible to play sports.<sup>4</sup> Whereas many on campus also believe that athletes work hard and have very busy schedules, these positive stereotypes are less prevalent than the negative beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Are college athletes aware of their stigmatized identity? Indeed, many athletes report that professors and traditional students perceive them negatively, and many have heard faculty members make negative remarks about athletes in class.<sup>6</sup> African American athletes feel especially scorned.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, African American athletes believe that professors and other students apply the dumb-jock stereotype to them more frequently than to white college athletes. Further, they report feeling greater pressure to prove that they belong in the classroom, that they can contribute to discussions and projects, and notably, that they can perform as well as their traditional peers.<sup>8</sup> They also report that white college athletes receive more forgiveness and leniency from professors and traditional classmates when they miss class or turn assignments in late due to sport-related travel.<sup>9</sup> Thus, African

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2. E.g., Harry Edwards, *The Black "Dumb Jock": An American Sports Tragedy*, 131 C. BOARD REV. 8 (1984); Gary Sailes, *An Investigation of Campus Stereotypes: The Myth of Black Athletic Superiority and the Dumb Jock Stereotype*, in *SPORT IN SOCIETY: EQUAL OPPORTUNITY OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?* 193–95 (Richard E. Lapchick ed., 1996).

3. See Forrest Foster, *When Eligibility is Over*, DIVERSE ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION, May 28, 2009, at 23, available at <http://myweb.wssu.edu/fosterfc/eligibilityisover.pdf>.

4. See RICHARD E. LAPCHICK, *SMASHING BARRIERS: RACE AND SPORT IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM* 265 (2001).

5. Suzanne Malia Lawrence et al., *A Day in the Life of a Male College Athlete: A Public Perception and Qualitative Campus Investigation*, 23 J. SPORT MGMT. 591, 592 (2009).

6. Herbert D. Simons et al., *The Athlete Stigma in Higher Education*, 41 C. STUDENT J. 251, 251 (2007).

7. John N. Singer, *Understanding Racism Through the Eyes of African American Male Student-Athletes*, 8 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 365, 379 (2005).

8. Brandon Martin et al., *Athletic Voices and Academic Victories: African American Male Student-Athlete Academic Experiences in the Pac-Ten*, 34 J. SPORT & SOC. ISSUES 131, 131–52 (2010).

9. *Id.*

American college athletes may be especially vigilant about how their stigmatized identity is viewed in the classroom.

The purpose of this Article is to review the emerging evidence suggesting that the dumb-jock stereotype can impact the academic performance of college athletes. When made salient in a classroom or other academic context, this negative academic stereotype can rob college athletes of the cognitive and emotional resources they need to succeed in college.

### I. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF STEREOTYPE THREAT

Research conducted in the 1960s revealed that negative stereotypes can impair performance when students interact with a teacher who holds such a stereotype about their group's potential.<sup>10</sup> An important recent discovery is that stigmatized targets do not need to interact with a biased individual in order for negative stereotypes to have a debilitating effect on behavior.<sup>11</sup> According to the theoretical framework guiding research on "stereotype threat,"<sup>12</sup> when a negative stereotype about a group becomes salient as the criteria for evaluating performance, individual group members may become concerned that their performance will confirm the validity of the negative stereotype.<sup>13</sup> The increased concern the stereotype imposes adds an additional psychological burden to the task that, in turn, reduces an individual's ability to perform to his or her full potential.<sup>14</sup> In the initial studies, African American and white college students at Stanford University completed items from the verbal section of the Graduate Record Exam ("GRE").<sup>15</sup> Test performance showed that when the negative stereotype about the innate intelligence of African Americans was primed by framing the test as diagnostic of "verbal reasoning ability," African Americans correctly answered

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10. Monica J. Harris & Robert Rosenthal, *Mediation of Interpersonal Expectancy Effects: 31 Meta-Analyses*, 97 *PSYCHOL. BULL.* 363, 363 (1985).

11. CLAUDE M. STEELE, WHISTLING VIVALDI: HOW STEREOTYPES AFFECT US AND WHAT WE CAN DO 54 (2010).

12. *Id.*; see David M. Marx, *Differentiating Theories: A Comparison of Stereotype Threat and Stereotype Priming Effects*, in *STEREOTYPE THREAT* 124, 124 (Michael Inzlicht & Toni Schmader eds., 2012).

13. Claude M. Steele & Joshua Aronson, *Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans*, 69 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 797, 797 (1995).

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 799.

22 percent fewer items compared to whites, and correctly answered 23 percent fewer answers compared to African Americans who were told the test was non-diagnostic of verbal reasoning.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in early studies testing the role of stereotype threat in the performance of women in math, when performance on a standardized math test was explicitly said to measure gender differences in math, the performance of female participants dropped by over 50 percent compared to the performance of men generally and of women who were told that the test did not measure gender differences in math.<sup>17</sup> Thus, stereotype threat processes have a negative impact on the scholastic performance of groups who are traditionally stigmatized in academic settings.

We now know that stereotype threat processes are not limited to groups that are traditionally stigmatized in academics; the threat of confirming a negative stereotype can impact anyone who holds a stigmatized identity in any domain—including sports.<sup>18</sup> Studies show that, when salient, negative stereotypes about the natural athletic ability of white males and females, the sports intelligence of African American athletes, and the putting accuracy of male golfers can induce the stereotype threat processes that reduce each group's performance on a sports task.<sup>19</sup> Stereotype threat can also impair women during negotiations,<sup>20</sup> cause white males to act more prejudiced,<sup>21</sup> and cause elderly people to become more forgetful.<sup>22</sup> The breadth of findings shows that stereotype threat is a general psychological process that can impact anyone who belongs to a group for which there exists negative stereotypes.

After more than fifteen years of study, researchers surmise that stereotype threat is caused by a cognitive and emotional

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16. See *id.* at 800.

17. Steve J. Spencer et al., *Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance*, 35 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 4, 10 (1999).

18. Jeff Stone et al., *Stereotype Threat Effects on Black and White Athletic Performance*, 77 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1213, 1225 (1999).

19. Jeff Stone et al., *The Impact of Stereotype Threat on Performance in Sports*, in STEREOTYPE THREAT, *supra* note 12, at 220–24.

20. See Laura J. Kray et al., *Battle of the Sexes: Gender Stereotype Confirmation and Reactance in Negotiations*, 80 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCHOL. 942, 942–43, 956 (2001).

21. Cynthia M. Frantz et al., *A Threat in the Computer: The Race Implicit Association Test as a Stereotype Threat Experience*, 30 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1611, 1623 (2004).

22. Alison L. Chasteen et al., *Aging and Stereotype Threat: Development, Process, and Interventions*, in STEREOTYPE THREAT, *supra* note 12, at 205.

imbalance that occurs when cues in a social context activate three cognitive links: first, the salience of the stereotype that one's social group typically underperforms in a domain; second, the salience of one's membership in the target group; and third, the salience of one's personal desire to perform well in the domain.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, stereotype threat does not follow from the isolated activation of each concept, but from the *propositional relation* that defines an imbalance between the three concepts. In its most virulent form, stereotype threat involves the simultaneous activation of a positive relationship between one's group membership and personal goals, a positive relationship between personal goals and performance in the domain, and, as implied by the negative stereotype, a negative relationship between one's group membership and performance in the domain. Activating the imbalance between these three concepts leads to tension and distress, which undermines working memory capacity and increases performance monitoring processes that impair the ability to demonstrate one's full potential. Factors that allow targets to reject the negative stereotype about their group, distance themselves from membership in the stigmatized group, reduce their motivation to succeed in the domain, or trivialize the association between the components, mitigate the impact of stereotype threat on a target individual's performance.

Thus, being the target of a negative stereotype engenders a threat to one's identity that may consume the very psychological resources required to overcome the potential negative characterization. Recent studies show that this can happen to college athletes when the dumb-jock stereotype is brought to mind in the classroom.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Toni Schmader et al., *An Integrated Process Model of Stereotype Threat Effects on Performance*, 115 PSYCHOL. REV. 336, 336 (2008).

24. Darren J. A. Yopyk & Deborah A. Prentice, *Am I an Athlete or a Student? Identity Salience and Stereotype Threat in Student-Athletes*, 27 BASIC & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 329, 332–33 (2010); Thomas S. Dee, *Stereotype Threat and the Student-Athlete* 16–24 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 14705, 2009), available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1344687](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1344687).

## II. ACADEMIC STEREOTYPE THREAT FOR THE COLLEGE ATHLETE

The evidence reviewed to this point indicates that student-athletes know the negative cultural stereotypes about their group, such as that they are less intelligent, less academically prepared, and less academically motivated than traditional students, but most student-athletes do not believe that these negative stereotypes apply to them personally.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that student-athletes who perceive that they are the targets of a negative academic stereotype in a classroom situation may experience stereotype threat, and as a result, they may perform more poorly, as compared to their possible performance in a stereotype-neutral context.

In one study designed to investigate the role of stereotype threat and the academic performance of college athletes, student-athletes at a highly selective liberal arts college completed a difficult math test comprised of items taken from the quantitative section of the GRE.<sup>26</sup> To induce stereotype threat, participants were asked to write about either their most recent athletic competition (high stereotype threat) or a recent academic success (low stereotype threat) prior to completing the math test.<sup>27</sup> The test results showed that student-athletes completed significantly fewer of the difficult math items correctly when primed for their athletic identity compared to when primed for their academic identity.<sup>28</sup> In addition, detailed analysis of the test performance showed that the athletic identity prime reduced the number of items attempted on the exam.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the lower performance exhibited by student-athletes when their athletic identity was primed was significantly mediated by its impact on self-regard; compared to the academic identity prime, the athletic prime apparently lowered their self-regard, which, in turn, reduced their performance on the test.<sup>30</sup>

In another study at a highly selective liberal arts college, athletes were recruited to complete both quantitative and verbal

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25. Simons et al., *supra* note 6, at 266–68.

26. Yopyk & Prentice, *supra* note 24, at 329.

27. *Id.* at 330.

28. *Id.* at 332.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*

items from the GRE.<sup>31</sup> Before beginning the test, the athletes completed questions about their participation in college athletics.<sup>32</sup> In the stereotype threat condition, participants then completed questions about the conflict they experience between athletics and academics.<sup>33</sup> In the control condition, they completed questions about the food on campus.<sup>34</sup> The results of their test performance showed that, as predicted, athletes in the stereotype threat condition performed poorer on the difficult test items compared to the athletes in the control condition.<sup>35</sup>

These studies suggest that when brought to mind in a classroom context, their identity as athlete on campus can activate the stereotype threat processes that impair their academic performance. However, there is no reason to believe that these findings are limited to athletes who play sports at a small, highly selective liberal arts campus. Theoretically, stereotype threat should impact the academic performance of athletes on any campus that subscribes to the dumb-jock stereotype. Nevertheless, the research predicts that stereotype threat is most likely to impact a subset of athletes on campus, and the effect should be especially pernicious when reminders of their athletic identity make the dumb-jock stereotype salient.

For example, the degree to which priming the athletic identity of college athletes causes stereotype threat should depend on the student-athlete's desire to succeed in the classroom. College athletes are most likely to perceive an imbalance between their athletic identity and the negative academic stereotype if they are intrinsically motivated to succeed in academics.<sup>36</sup> Previous research shows that when target individuals are personally divested or "psychologically disengaged" from performance in the stereotyped domain, reminders of the negative stereotype—or of their membership in the stigmatized group—do not impair their performance.<sup>37</sup> Targets who are psychologically engaged in the

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31. Dee, *supra* note 24, at 16–24.

32. *Id.* at 16.

33. *Id.* at 16–17.

34. *Id.* at 17.

35. *Id.* at 18–23.

36. See Schmader, *supra* note 23, at 339 (“[S]tudies have shown that individuals experience stereotype threat to the degree that doing well in the domain is personally important to them.”).

37. *Id.*

performance domain—those who define their self-worth in part through their performance on domain-relevant tasks—are more likely to perceive the imbalance between their identification with the group and the negative group stereotype that instigates stereotype threat processes.<sup>38</sup> Thus, cues linking athletic identity to academic performance should cause more stereotype threat among college athletes who are psychologically engaged in their performance in academics compared to college athletes who are psychologically disengaged from their performance in the classroom.

The impact of stereotype threat on academically engaged college athletes should also depend on the nature of the cues that bring to mind their athletic identity in an academic context. Cues that only activate their athletic identity should have less effect than cues that directly activate the imbalanced propositional relationship between the multiple identities and goals in the triad.<sup>39</sup> Whereas numerous studies show that focusing targets primarily on one aspect of their stigma is often sufficient to impair performance, these threat effects likely occur because many stigmatized groups develop automatic associations between their group membership, personal goals, and the negative cultural stereotypes about their group's deficiencies.<sup>40</sup> As noted above, some research with college athletes indicates that focusing students on their athletic identity in an academic context is sufficient to induce the stereotype threat processes that reduce academic performance.<sup>41</sup>

Other cues, however, that directly activate the negative relationship between their athletic identity and the negative academic stereotype, should exacerbate the debilitating processes that underlie stereotype threat. The most prominent threat cue for athletes on a college campus is the use of the term "student-athlete," which can directly activate the relationship between their positive group membership—athlete—and the negative stereotype regarding their academic abilities—student.<sup>42</sup> The term "student-

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38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. Yopyk & Prentice, *supra* note 24, at 332.

41. *Id.* at 330.

42. Ellen J. Staurowsky & Allen L. Sack, *Reconsidering the Use of the Term Student-Athlete in Academic Research*, 19 J. SPORT MGMT. 103, 103 (2005).

athlete” or “scholar-athlete” refers to an athlete who receives a scholarship to play sports in college.<sup>43</sup> The NCAA adopted the term for two reasons: first, to protect universities from the legal obligation to treat college athletes as employees, and, second, to emphasize that college athletes are members of the student body.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, numerous researchers, educators, and administrators publicly criticize the term.<sup>45</sup> Some people refer to it as an oxymoron that continuously reminds people of the inconsistency between being an athlete and a college student—the essence of the negative dumb-jock stereotype.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the term student-athlete has the potential to directly prime the imbalanced propositional relationship between their athletic and academic identities, which should intensify concerns about confirming the dumb-jock stereotype when highly engaged college athletes perform academically.

In the first test of the role of academic engagement and the toxicity of the term “student-athlete” in the classroom, my colleagues and I predicted that female athletes—who tend to be more academically engaged than male athletes—would perform poorer on a test of verbal reasoning when primed for their identity as a “scholar-athlete” compared to when primed only for their identity as an “athlete.”<sup>47</sup> Research indicates that female athletes tend to outperform male athletes academically,<sup>48</sup> take more responsibility for the creation of their academic schedules, and graduate at a higher rate than male athletes.<sup>49</sup> The lack of professional opportunities in athletics beyond their NCAA sport careers may cause female athletes to place less emphasis on their

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43. *Id.* at 105–07.

44. Taylor Branch, *The Shame of College Sports*, ATLANTIC (Oct. 2011), available at [http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/8643/?single\\_page=true](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/10/the-shame-of-college-sports/8643/?single_page=true).

45. See Staurowsky & Sack, *supra* note 42, at 109–11; JAMES L. SHULMAN & WILLIAM G. BOWEN, *THE GAME OF LIFE: COLLEGE SPORTS AND EDUCATIONAL VALUES* 63–64 (2001).

46. Stan Katz, *Is the Term ‘Scholar Athlete’ an Oxymoron?*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Nov. 23, 2008), available at <http://chronicle.com/blogPost/is-the-term-scholar-athlete-an-oxymoron/6479>.

47. C. Keith Harrison et al., *The Role of Gender Identities and Stereotype Salience with the Academic Performance of Male and Female College Athletes*, 33 J. SPORT & SOC. ISSUES 78, 78 (2009).

48. Isis H. Settles et al., *One Role or Two? The Function of Psychological Separation in Role Conflict*, 87 J. APPLIED PSYCHOL. 574, 574–79 (2002).

49. Barbara Bedker Meyer, *From Idealism to Actualization: The Academic Performance of Female Collegiate Athletes*, 7 SOC. SPORT J. 44, 56 (1990).

athletic identity and more emphasis on preparing for a career outside their sports.<sup>50</sup> As a result, female athletes may represent an academic vanguard within the student-athlete population—a subset of individuals within the stigmatized group that are the most “psychologically engaged” in their academic performance outcomes.

In the study, forty-five male and forty-three female college athletes at two Pac-10 Conference (now Pack-12 Conference) universities were recruited with the help and support of their athletic departments to participate in a study on “test taking strategies.”<sup>51</sup> To simulate a classroom context, the testing sessions were conducted in a campus classroom and traditional students were also recruited to each session (although their test scores were not recorded).<sup>52</sup> The athletes were randomly assigned to desks around the room so that they were not all sitting together.<sup>53</sup> After they signed a consent form, the person running the session explained that the study was a joint collaboration between the Athletics and Psychology Departments.<sup>54</sup> They were told that the educational issues being investigated were important for college athletes and that the results may be used to improve the classroom atmosphere and performance of college athletes in the future.<sup>55</sup> They were told that the envelopes on each desk contained an Scholastic Aptitude Test (“SAT”)-style verbal analogies test and that they would have fifteen minutes to complete the test.<sup>56</sup> After questions were answered, the tester instructed participants to remove the test booklet and begin.<sup>57</sup>

Stereotype threat processes were manipulated by varying the information on the cover page of the test booklet.<sup>58</sup> In the “athletic-only prime” condition, the cover page of the exam booklet stated, “If you participate in Division I intercollegiate sports, please indicate below.” Participants were then asked to

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50. See JAY COAKLEY, *SPORT IN SOCIETY: ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES* 297–99, 431 (7th ed. 2001).

51. Harrison et al., *supra* note 47, at 84.

52. *Id.*

53. *See id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.*

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

check next to the statement "I am an athlete."<sup>59</sup> For those in the "student-athlete prime" condition, following the statement about participation in sports, participants were asked to check next to the statement "I am a scholar-athlete."<sup>60</sup> Finally, for participants in the "neutral prime" condition, no reference was made to participation in sports—the cover page simply stated, "If you are a research subject, please indicate below" and participants were asked to mark next to the statement "I am a research-participant."<sup>61</sup> The test of verbal analogies was constructed from thirty-two SAT and eight GRE verbal analogy items taken from practice manuals.<sup>62</sup>

Analysis of the percentage of items the student-athletes completed correctly showed that among the female athletes, priming their identity as a "scholar-athlete" reduced performance by 20 percent on the easier SAT verbal test items compared to when primed for their athletic or a neutral identity.<sup>63</sup> Thus, as predicted, for the more academically engaged athletes, directly priming the negative propositional relationship between the concepts "scholar" and "athlete" enhanced the debilitating effects of stereotype threat on their academic performance. The data also showed that when primed for their athletic identity only, male athletes performed 27 percent better than males in the control condition on the relatively difficult GRE test items, and there were no differences across conditions in the number of test items completed.<sup>64</sup> These findings do not replicate the studies conducted with athletes on the more highly selective campuses.<sup>65</sup> Whereas this could suggest that male athletes are relatively immune to the salience of the dumb-jock stereotype in the classroom, the study did not directly control for other variables—such as the degree of academic engagement—that may have played an important role in how males responded to reminders of their athletic identity on campus.

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59. *Id.*

60. *Id.* at 84–85.

61. *Id.* at 85.

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.* at 85–86.

64. *Id.*

65. *Id.* at 89.

Another critical variable not addressed in the previous set of studies is the role of racial identity on the impact of stereotype threat on college athletes in the classroom. Stereotype threat is especially important for understanding the academic performance of African American college athletes, who represent the largest racial minority group of athletes in the NCAA.<sup>66</sup> In light of the evidence showing that traditional African American college students are at risk for stereotype threat in academic settings when their racial identity is made salient, we believe that the same fate will befall academically engaged African American college athletes when their status as scholar-athletes is salient prior to an academic performance.

Academically engaged white college athletes, in contrast, may be somewhat immune to cues that activate their identity as a student-athlete in the classroom. If, as suggested above, they receive relatively more positive treatment by professors and traditional students on campus, white athletes may have fewer negative associations with their athletic identity in the classroom. In addition, research suggests that athletes who separate or “compartmentalize” their roles as athletes from their roles as students report higher levels of psychological well-being compared to student-athletes who suffer “interference” or overlap between their athletic and academic identities.<sup>67</sup> This could suggest that some student-athletes are more likely to cope with the conflict between their athletic and academic identities by cognitively isolating one identity from the other.<sup>68</sup> Thus, if white athletes possess a more bifurcated relationship between their scholar and athletic identities, priming their athletic identity may not automatically activate the imbalance that leads to stereotype threat.

We recently tested the joint effect of race and academic engagement in the academic test performance of African

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66. Jeff Stone et al., “Don’t Call Me a Student-Athlete”: *The Effect of Identity Priming on Stereotype Threat for Academically Engaged African American College Athletes*, 34 BASIC & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 1, 1, 8 (2012).

67. Settles et al., *supra* note 48, at 579.

68. Cf. Emily Pronin et al., *Identity Bifurcation in Response to Stereotype Threat: Women and Mathematics*, 40 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 152 (2004) (demonstrating how women strongly identified with mathematics would disavow feminine characteristics when presented with a scientific article reporting stereotype-consistent sex differences in math aptitude).

American and white college athletes when their identity as an athlete was made salient before completing a measure of verbal reasoning.<sup>69</sup> The predictions were that, on difficult test items, when primed for their identity as athletes, academically engaged African American college athletes would experience stereotype threat and perform more poorly than academically engaged white student-athletes and more poorly than African American college athletes in a neutral identity control condition.<sup>70</sup> This pattern would conceptually replicate the standard stereotype threat effect. However, when primed for their identity as a "scholar-athlete," the accessibility of the negative propositional relationship between their athletic identity and the negative academic stereotype would cause highly engaged African American college athletes to perceive a greater imbalance and sense of threat, which would decrease their performance below that of African American college athletes in the athletic and neutral identity priming conditions.<sup>71</sup> Replicating our earlier study, performance in the scholar-athlete prime condition would suffer on both the difficult and easy test items.<sup>72</sup>

We recruited a total of 151 student-athletes at a large Division I state university in the southern United States.<sup>73</sup> The sample included forty African American females, thirty-five African American males, thirty-five white females, and thirty-eight white males; the participants were athletes on the track, football, basketball, rowing, baseball, soccer, golf, or softball teams.<sup>74</sup> Prior to each athletic team's practice, participants completed an informed consent form and then a pretest packet that included a self-report measure of academic engagement.<sup>75</sup> Participants then arranged to complete the testing session within a few weeks.<sup>76</sup> When they arrived, the procedures and testing materials were the same as in our previous study.<sup>77</sup> The primary performance

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69. Stone et al., *supra* note 66, at 1.

70. *Id.* at 3.

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*; see Harrison et al., *supra* note 47.

73. Stone et al., *supra* note 66, at 3.

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.* at 4.

76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

measure was the number of items they completed correctly on the forty-item test of verbal reasoning.<sup>78</sup>

The results showed that, as predicted, among athletes who reported high academic engagement, African American athletes performed 50 percent worse on the difficult test items when their athletic identity was primed on the test booklet compared to African American athletes in the neutral control condition and 52 percent below the performance of white athletes when their athletic identity was primed.<sup>79</sup> Priming athletic identity alone did not impact the performance of academically engaged African American or white athletes on the easy test items, suggesting that the athletic identity of the African American athletes only promoted concern about confirming the dumb-jock stereotype when they struggled on the test.<sup>80</sup>

However, in the sessions where their identity as a “scholar-athlete” was made salient, African American athletes high in academic engagement performed worse on both the difficult *and* easy test items.<sup>81</sup> Specifically, highly engaged African American athletes scored 67 percent lower on the difficult items than African Americans in the neutral prime condition, and 73 percent lower than white athletes whose identity as a scholar-athlete was primed.<sup>82</sup> On the easy test items, engaged African American athletes scored 25 percent lower than African Americans in the neutral prime condition and 55 percent lower than engaged white athletes in the scholar-athlete condition.<sup>83</sup> Importantly, none of the differences in performance were due to differences in the number of items completed—all of the engaged athletes completed all of the test items.<sup>84</sup> Thus, directly priming the imbalanced relationship between their athletic and academic identities enhanced the threat processes that, despite their best efforts to complete the test, devastated the ability of academically engaged African American athletes to solve even the easiest verbal analogies.<sup>85</sup>

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78. *Id.*

79. *Id.* at 5.

80. *Id.*

81. *Id.*

82. *Id.*

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.* at 5–6.

85. *Id.* at 5.

Finally, the disengaged African American athletes performed somewhat worse than the disengaged white athletes regardless of which identity was primed.<sup>86</sup> Thus, consistent with previous research on stereotype threat, the athletes who placed less value on their academic outcomes were unaffected by the salience of their athletic identity in the classroom context.<sup>87</sup>

Together, the results suggest that priming different identities caused different levels or types of stereotype threat for the academically engaged African American college athletes.<sup>88</sup> Priming just their athletic identity reduced the performance of academically engaged African American college athletes, suggesting that priming just one component of the imbalanced relationship between their athletic and academic identities had a significant, but only moderate, effect on the cognitive resources and processing they needed in order to perform well on the overall test.<sup>89</sup> In contrast, priming their identity as a scholar-athlete not only reduced performance on the difficult test items, but it also sabotaged the performance of engaged African American college athletes on the easy test items.<sup>90</sup> We believe that priming the identity of a scholar-athlete directly brought to mind the imbalanced relationship between their athletic identity, the dumb-jock stereotype, and their desire to succeed in academics.<sup>91</sup> This induced a relatively high level of tension that, in turn, overwhelmed the working memory processes that facilitate performance on both difficult and easy test items.<sup>92</sup> From this perspective, priming different identities had different consequences for performance because the primes affected the strength of the activation between the relevant set of imbalanced personal and social identities.<sup>93</sup>

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86. *Id.*

87. *Id.* at 6–7.

88. *Id.* at 6.

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.*

### III. STRATEGIES FOR LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

There are numerous cultural, contextual, and intrapersonal factors that constrain and enhance human performance during rapid change. I believe that exploring stereotype threat processes with college athletes reveals how stereotypes impact a stigmatized group of students that are simultaneously experiencing several major life transitions. As freshmen, college athletes experience numerous changes and new challenges that impact their academic performance in the classroom. For many, it is the first time they have lived away from home and away from their families and peer-support groups. They are thrust into the international spotlight for their sport, where the new competition is more elite and the media scrutiny is intense.<sup>94</sup> In addition to the adjustments required to compete at this new level of their sport, they must also adjust to new roommates, new teammates, new coaches, and a large list of new rules and regulations to follow.

In the classroom, the changes and challenges can be even more dramatic; many of their college classes are larger and more impersonal than in high school. The course material is also more difficult, requiring more hours to read, write, and complete projects and other assignments. These challenges are compounded by the newfound responsibilities of having to attend practice, all team functions, and appearances; traveling; having to cook and eat nutritiously; sleeping; doing laundry; and having a social life. As noted above, many find their new dual role overwhelming and stressful. Athletic departments worry that the experiences of athletes during the first year of college are likely to have an impact on how well freshmen embrace their dual role as athletes and students on campus. Early experiences in the classroom with professors, teaching assistants, and traditional students are likely to shape how they approach the educational opportunities provided by their talent in sports.

The stereotyping and stereotype threat processes that college athletes endure at this transitional stage may be especially

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94. C. Keith Harrison et al., Research Note, *Diggin' Deeper into the Culture of Revenue Sports: The Need for the Baller Identity Measurement Scale (BIMS) in Assessing Academic and Athletic Identities in Society*, 4 J. FOR STUDY SPORTS & ATHLETES EDUC. 325, 329 (2010).

important for understanding how they cope with the pressures as they adapt to new roles and identities. To the degree the academic climate explicitly or implicitly conveys exclusion, new college athletes may feel like they are not welcome in the classroom, office hours, or study groups. As a result, some may disengage from education as a way to cope with their frustration. Others may resign themselves to "passing" by disguising their athletic identity from professors, teaching assistants, and other students. Such strategic coping responses are likely to put additional burdens on new athletes that negatively affect their performance in the classroom. The best-case scenario is that, in order to achieve academically under a negative climate in the classroom, college athletes are forced to work much harder and suffer more stress, which has the potential to reduce their academic success.

An important direction for policy is to develop and implement programs for reducing the potential negative impact of the term "student-athlete" on college athletes. Assuming that the NCAA will continue to use the potentially toxic term "student-athlete," it will be important to provide counter-stereotypic information about college athletes that can weaken or eliminate beliefs about the dumb-jock. Ironically, the NCAA created an advertisement campaign with the potential to achieve this goal. The typical advertisement presents college athletes in an academic or professional setting and ends with the line: "There are more than 380,000 *student-athletes*, and most of them go *pro* in something other than sports."<sup>95</sup> The message is that college athletes are more than just athletes—they are our future doctors, nurses, lawyers, business owners, and teachers, who, unlike the image of the dumb-jock, possess a very high level of intelligence, motivation, and integrity. This type of counter-stereotypic information should be presented in workshops on the psychology of stereotyping for current and new administrators, faculty, and traditional students to reduce and eventually eliminate the general perception that college athletes are dumb jocks who are only interested in playing sports.

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95. Press Release, NCAA, NCAA Launches Latest Public Service Announcements, Introduces New Student-Focused Website (Mar. 13, 2007) (emphases added), *available at* <http://fs.ncaa.org/Docs/PressArchive/2007/Announcements/NCAA%2BLaunches%2BLatest%2BPublic%2BService%2BAnnouncements%2BIntroduces%2BNew%2BStudent-Focused%2BWebsite.html>.

It is also important to develop programs that bolster the coping responses college athletes use when their athletic identity is brought to mind in a classroom context.<sup>96</sup> One educational approach that shows promise for helping college athletes overcome the stigma of sports is the Scholar-Baller curriculum intervention program.<sup>97</sup> Established in 1995, the goals of the Scholar-Baller program are to reframe the meaning of the term “student-athlete” and re-train college athletes so that they no longer associate the term “student-athlete” with “dumb jock.”<sup>98</sup> Scholar-Baller recognizes the academic achievements of college athletes who attain a GPA of 3.0 or higher or who demonstrate significant academic improvement.<sup>99</sup> Entry into the “Scholar-Baller Circle” takes place in part via the display of a uniform patch or a sticker called “Thinkman,” which is intended to draw attention to the academic success of athletes, while still allowing the players to demonstrate their athletic skills—truly epitomizing the NCAA’s use of the term “student-athlete.”<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, an important step in the development of a program like Scholar-Baller is to rigorously test whether involvement in the program helps disassociate the stereotype of the “dumb jock” from the identity of an athlete on campus. Programs that accomplish this goal could provide important coping resources for college athletes to deflect the stereotype threat they may experience when they enter a classroom on campus.

#### CONCLUSION

The term “student-athlete” may not be a positive label for all groups of athletes on a college campus. The research indicates that, especially for academically engaged African American students who play college sports, cues that bring to mind their

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96. Eddie Comeaux & Keith C. Harrison, *A Conceptual Model of Academic Success for Student-Athletes*, 40 EDUC. RES. 235, 236 (2011).

97. C. Keith Harrison & Jean Boyd, *Mainstreaming and Integrating the Spectacle and Substance of Scholar-Baller®: A New Blueprint for Higher Education, the NCAA, and Society*, in DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN COLLEGE SPORTS: SPORT MANAGEMENT AND THE STUDENT ATHLETE 201, 215 (Dana D. Brooks & Ronald C. Althouse eds., 2007); SCHOLAR BALLER, CURRICULUM, <http://scholarballer.org/research/curriculum> (last visited Jan. 21, 2012).

98. Harrison & Boyd, *supra* note 97, at 213, 215, 221.

99. *Id.* at 222.

100. *Id.*

status as scholarship athletes can enhance the threat of being labeled a "dumb jock."<sup>101</sup> The ensuing stereotype threat processes they experience can decrease their performance in the classroom above and beyond the detrimental effects of just making their athletic identity salient.<sup>102</sup> Educating the campus about college athletes' true academic determination and success, along with creating educational programs that help athletes deflect negative stereotypes, may help to eliminate the impact of bias on their academic outcomes.

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101. Stone et al., *supra* note 66, at 7–8.

102. *Id.* at 8.