

# Interventions in Support of Anti-Racist Praxis in Athletics

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*Abstract:* Since the 1990s, college athletic departments have developed parallel and redundant student services that are specific to athletics, ostensibly to broaden the accessibility of these resources for athletes. However, this insularity can create echo chambers and totalizing institutional norms. Previous research has documented that many athletics practitioners, even those in student-facing roles, are neither trained as educators nor student affairs professionals (Navarro et al., 2015). Additionally, athletics practitioners are often untrained and unprepared to address racial equity topics and have little prior experience working with racially diverse students and coworkers. This article discusses two efforts to better prepare anti-racist athletics practitioners: one at the graduate level with students working as athletics graduate assistants and pre-professional graduate students and a second with current athletics staff and administrators. Through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), we discuss the need, development, and theory of change undergirding these two interventions implemented at the University of Oklahoma and offer suggestions of how other universities and athletic departments could approach and/or implement similar programming.

*Keywords:* Critical Whiteness Studies, anti-racist praxis, professional development, graduate degree curriculum, intercollegiate athletics administration

## Symbolism and Intervention through College Athletics

College athletics occupy a unique and contradictory position within higher education in the United States (U.S.). Although athletic departments are separate and increasingly isolated from the rest of campus life (Comeaux, 2018; Hatteberg, 2018; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Smith, 2011), athletics are also one of the most prominent representatives or exemplars of higher education in general, and of any given institution (Hoffman, 2020). Higher education has built organizational cultures that position athletics as exceptional and outside of their governing structure, thereby permitting siloed and deviant actions within sports programs, all the while absolving academic leaders of culpability (Grummert & Rall, 2020; Hoffman, 2020). The paradox of athletics' *exceptionalism* and framing as an *institutional exemplar* parallels the contradictions implicit in athletics' relationship to racial justice movements. Despite sports – and college athletics, in particular – being hailed as sites for ameliorating racial discord and/or inequality (Hextrum, 2021a, 2018; Hirko, 2009), racial and gender issues remain endemic to intercollegiate athletics as racist and sexist ideologies and practices are promoted to external audiences through sport (Haslerig et al., 2019; 2020; Hextrum, 2020a; 2020b; Hextrum & Sethi, 2022).

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Furthermore, scholars have critiqued the racist and inequitable economic structure(s) of college athletics, from the governing principle of college sports, i.e., amateurism, that denies legal labor rights and protections (Ferguson & Davis, 2019; Grenardo, 2016; Staurowsky, 2014), to reliance on unpaid labor to generate revenue (Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2013). The overrepresentation of Black men in the most visible portions of athletic departments, i.e., revenue-generating sports, can obscure the fact that 80-90% of athletes, coaches, staff, and administrators are white (Lapchick, 2020). The methods through which the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) tracks racial demographics, e.g., creating averages across teams or departments, obscures how certain portions of athletic departments, such as upper administration, head coaches, and athletes on non-revenue generating teams, are virtually all-white (Hextrum, 2021a; 2021b). According to an internal department poll in 2020, 81% of athletics staff identified as white at the University of Oklahoma (OU).

Although there is robust research examining the negative and inequitable experiences of Black men in college football and basketball (e.g., Beamon, 2014; Bimper, 2015; Hawkins, 2013; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016), the often singular focus on their experiences can reinforce deficit narratives. It can also obscure the roles white athletes and athletic staff play in (re)creating and benefiting from institutionalized racism (Hextrum, 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b). In contrast, Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) centers systems of power and their beneficiaries. Racism exists as a dialectic in that one group reaps the benefits of another's harm (Fields, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). Thus, to truly improve the educational and athletic experiences for Athletes of Color, we must also interrogate how white people (re)enact and benefit from systemic racism in athletic departments.

Sport is often a site and symbol for broader fights for racial justice (Cooper et al., 2019; Ferguson & Davis, 2019; Hoffman, 2020; Jolly et al., 2021). However, when athletes use their platforms to draw attention to these national movements, a fallacious narrative often emerges that racial injustices are primarily *external* to sport. In some cases, sport is framed as a solution to the racial strife outside of sport, thus obfuscating racial conflicts and inequities internal to athletics. In contrast, the two interventions we discuss in this manuscript (a) acknowledge the racial injustice and inequity perpetuated within and through college athletics and (b) seek to mitigate that harm by better preparing practitioners to recognize and disrupt it.

In this article, we reflect upon interventions to counteract white supremacist athletic department cultures. We discuss our attempts at dismantling white supremacy in athletics through two interventions: one through a graduate curriculum for students in graduate assistantships in athletics and/or who are pre-professional and a second with current athletic practitioners. Both interventions occurred at OU – an exemplar of big-time college athletics and the corresponding racial paradoxes previously described. In sharing our approach, we offer a theory of change to address white supremacy in athletics through critically grounded formal and informal curricular offerings that mutually reinforce each other to reshape organizational cultures. We conclude by acknowledging that interventions will inevitably remain imperfect and incomplete, then discuss how to further develop future interventions and the value of such programming despite ongoing limitations. Although we intended to publish this piece when we were still OU employees, some of the factors that made this work so necessary also contributed to our individual choices to move on from Oklahoma. This work is difficult and ongoing. What we report here are worthwhile, yet

incomplete, interventions. We hope that this article can serve as a model for other scholar-practitioners who may be able to adapt and use it to carry the larger goals forward.

### Theories of Change

These two interrelated racial justice interventions were grounded in critical theories of race and racism. When discussing whiteness, we utilize CWS, an expansive area of scholarship united in the pressing need to identify, so as to dismantle the structural, institutional, and individual manifestations of white supremacy. Under our current racial order, *whiteness* is often inaccurately defined as a set of invisible and unearned privileges (McIntosh, 1989); in contrast, CWS locates whiteness as an outcome of racial domination (Leonardo, 2004). CWS is rooted in Critical Race Studies (CRS) and Theory (CRT) – a collection of structural and systemic explanations of white supremacy emerging from Black legal scholars in the 1980s (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). CWS defines whiteness as emerging from historic, social, cultural, political, and economic processes that elevate and unify white people, at the expense and exclusion of People of Color (Gusa, 2010; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2009). In part, racial domination is maintained through the socialization of whites to misunderstand how race and racism operate (Fields, 2001; Leonardo, 2009; Leonardo & Manning, 2017). Thus, by definition, *anti-racist spaces* must address the structural components of how racism informs all our institutions *and* dispel the inaccurate and often individualized explanations of racism that inform a white worldview (Leonardo & Manning, 2017). Doing so requires acknowledging white people’s limited and inaccurate understandings of racism; centering People of Color’s stories and experiences with racism, including Scholars of Color’s accounts of racism; framing racism as a multi-layered process that manifests at individual, ideological, interaction, and structural levels; and creating space for white people to re-learn about racism (Cabrera, 2018; Leonardo, 2004; 2009; Mills, 2003).

Discussing the totality of racism in this fashion requires reiterative, ongoing, and dispersed interventions. CWS and CRT assert that racism is in flux, taking on new iterations and shapes (Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). Therefore, combatting racism requires ongoing consciousness-raising and commitments to racial justice work (Cabrera, 2018; Leonardo & Manning, 2017). Even when higher education provides CRT or CWS curricula within graduate programs, exposure to such theories usually reflects a single point-in-time learning opportunity that is unlikely to drive life-long commitments to anti-racist practices (Cabrera, 2018). The same is true of professional development and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for professional staff and administrators (Adamian & Jayakumar, 2018). In contrast, eradicating white supremacy in organizational cultures and hierarchies requires regular, ongoing interventions aimed at undoing the ideological and material underpinnings of whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). As such, all practitioners, regardless of their previous training, can and should engage with regular and anti-racist interventions.

### Harm Reduction

We approached each intervention from the perspective of *harm mitigation*, rather than seeking to “solve” racism. This ethos aligns with theory and best practice in several ways. Notably, CRS asserts that racism is an everyday and persistent reality, and *racial progress* is dependent on interest convergence and, ultimately, limited by the fleeting nature of that convergence (Bell,

1980). As such, we approached our work with realism about the difficulty of producing sustainable and/or systemic change. Recognizing that we would neither be able to implement perfect nor permanent solutions, we instead sought to intervene where possible, believing that mitigating harm is always worthwhile (and, in fact, a moral imperative). Although the harm reduction paradigm is complementary to CRS, they are rarely explicitly linked in the scholarly literature on anti-racist practice (one exception is Ozias, 2023). Table 1 provides examples of how the concept of harm mitigation or reduction is utilized in several disparate fields and movements, including public health (Des Jarlais et al., 1993; Lee & Zerai, 2010; Marlatt, 1996; Roe, 2005; Stancliff, 2015), violence prevention (Hoxmeier et al., 2020), philosophy (Dea, 2020; Kleinig, 2008), and transformative justice (Mingus, 2021).

**Table 1**

*Harm Reduction*

Context	Harm Reduction Example(s)
Public Health	The harm reduction paradigm in public health has been described as “front line public health” and “pragmatic” (Stancliff et al., 2015); it emphasizes mitigating risk and harm, rather than abstinence from – or punishment for – potentially risky behaviors (e.g., drug use or sex). Examples of harm reduction interventions can include needle exchanges, safe injection sites, safe sex campaigns, condom distribution, safe harbor laws, decriminalization and attendant regulation (e.g., of drug use or sex work), and Narcan trainings.
Violence Prevention	Bystander intervention trainings directly address and are structured according to the logic of harm mitigation. Such trainings teach multiple forms of intervention (often framed as the 5 ‘Ds’: direct, delegate, delay, distract, and document) and to assess which intervention will be most effective at mitigating immediate harm, taking into account how the intervener is best positioned to intervene and prioritizing immediate safety (including the intervener’s safety) over fully addressing the issue in the moment. It is more important to thwart an impending sexual assault, for example, than to educate about consent or to hold the perpetrator accountable in that moment. Bystander interventions can be used to disrupt various forms of violence, including gender-based violence and racial microaggressions. Bystander intervention underscores individuals’ responsibility and ability to intervene, training participants to do whatever they can, when they can, to mitigate harm.
Transformative Justice (TJ)	TJ requires reassessing immediate responses to violence to ensure we address it in ways that don’t perpetuate harm. “At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging [sic] in harm reduction to lessen the violence” (Mingus, 2021, p. 17). Furthermore, this perspective highlights the nuance of harm, recognizing that there is often ongoing harm exacted in the course of attempting to redress an initial harm. As such, TJ demands the dismantling and remaking of systems for addressing violence and harm, while also mitigating and preventing harm by always centering accountability and communal care.

There is one area of possible tension between these theoretical underpinnings and our own practice: whereas TJ argues that violence is reproduced by existing systems, we have attempted to work *with* existing systems (though not from within them), even as we recognize the limitations thereof. Nonetheless, our approach is in line with the idea of working *with* those in existing systems to mitigate harm, while simultaneously building alternative systems. Ideally, the goal of this approach is to build a *bridge to a new system* through your work, rather than to reach an endpoint of ‘reform’ to the current system. Harm reduction has sometimes been criticized for focusing solely on reducing high-risk behaviors instead of addressing systems (e.g., Hoxmeier et al., 2020; Wuthrich, 2009). Conversely, we approached harm reduction from the expanded, more comprehensive starting point of *vulnerability reduction* (Ezard, 2001), which takes into account both the social systems that create conditions of vulnerability to risk and the reduction of immediate risks.

### **Anti-Racist Interventions in College Sports**

In this manuscript, we reflect on two interventions that aimed to prepare athletics practitioners to develop their own anti-racist praxis. The first intervention occurred through reshaping a graduate curriculum. The second intervention targeted current athletic staff not enrolled in graduate school. Both interventions were implemented in an iterative, mutually informing (and reinforcing) way due to the relationship between OU’s Intercollegiate Athletics Administration (IAA) concentration, nested within the Adult & Higher Education (EDAH) MED program and the OU Athletic Department. Each intervention benefited from the working relationship between IAA and OU Athletics, but they were functionally situated in one unit or the other. For a short time, there was evidence of a true partnership between IAA and OU Athletics in working toward anti-racist goals. The students in the IAA program are graduate students employed in athletics assistantship positions (GAs) and/or pre-professional students interested in careers within intercollegiate athletics. As such, the first intervention – formal curricular changes in the IAA concentration – had direct and indirect impacts on OU Athletics and the field more generally, despite its narrow focus on IAA graduate students.

The second intervention involved tailored workshops and training sessions for current practitioners, including upper administration, within OU’s athletic department. Hosted by faculty in the IAA program, these trainings offered theoretical and research-informed content on the pressing issues facing athletic departments and challenged practitioners to change existing department norms. Like IAA’s graduate curriculum, the practitioner professional development programming sought to train participants to *intervene* in and *disrupt* inequitable practices and policies within their current and/or future workplaces. In this sense, a third, ongoing, form of intervention was embedded in both curricular interventions. As such, we intended to build sustainable cultures wherein practitioners themselves could engage in ongoing justice work, rather than solely relying upon sporadic, temporary (and therefore ineffective) DEI workshops (Adamian & Jayakumar, 2018) or the labor of Practitioners of Color (Quaye et al., 2020). This third, meta-form of intervention was particularly important to bridge the tension between the dual necessities of (a) inviting in DEI experts and truly valuing their expertise and (b) tailoring programming to the specific context and building increasing ownership of the anti-racist intervention within the athletic organization.

In the following sections, we describe the design and implementation of each intervention and discuss how it contributed to our theory of change. While both authors were heavily involved in each intervention, for clarity, each author narrates one intervention section from a first-person perspective. The first author, Dr. Siduri Haslerig, narrates revisions to IAA's graduate curriculum, and the second author, Dr. Kirsten Hextrum, narrates the development of anti-racist programming for athletic practitioners. Both narrations discuss how the interventions were grounded in CRS and sought to disrupt white supremacy in athletic organizations. In writing this article, we engaged in an iterative practice of reflexivity (Pillow, 2003), which informed and improved our methods contemporaneously; furthermore, in retrospect, our reflexivity deepened our understanding of our attempts at racial justice programming. We share our reflections and programming efforts to provide a model for scholar-practitioners, both in creating responsive and effective interventions and in enacting reflexivity about their own praxis.

### **Intervention 1: Revising a Graduate Curriculum for Social Change (Dr. Siduri Haslerig)**

OU's Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education (JRCoE) and Athletics Department have long-standing relationships. The JRCoE houses an academic concentration in Intercollegiate Athletics Administration (IAA), situated within the Adult & Higher Education (EDAH) MED program. The IAA emphasis area began in 1998 and became a formal concentration in 2013. The IAA program prepares aspiring athletic practitioners to pursue a range of careers in college sports. IAA students complete the required coursework in EDAH, which provides them with a breadth of knowledge about higher education. They also complete specialized courses surveying the most pressing issues in college sports. The concentration annually enrolls approximately 35 students who hold Graduate Assistantships in OU Athletics.

When I arrived at the University of Oklahoma in 2014, the IAA program approached training practitioners from career, business, and technical vantage points, and had recently incorporated an increasingly student affairs perspective (Bernhard et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2015). The courses offered little critique or interrogation of underlying forces of exclusion and domination that undergird college sport and/or how to transform athletics into a more equitable and inclusive environment. This issue was not unique to OU; athletics practitioners are often untrained and unprepared to address racial equity topics and may have little prior experience working with racially diverse students and coworkers (Bernhard & Haslerig, 2017). When I became the director of IAA in 2015, I endeavored to build stronger faculty capacity by recruiting and hiring two tenure-track assistant professors (including my coauthor, Dr. Kirsten Hextrum). In designing the job calls and descriptions, I intentionally sought faculty whose professional experience, research agenda, and positionality aligned with expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion in college sports.

My first initiative was to ensure our two "diversity" courses in the existing IAA curriculum – "Diversity in Sport" (later renamed "Race and Ethnicity in Intercollegiate Athletics") and "Gender Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics" – were grounded in critical and justice-oriented theories and research. For "Diversity in Sport," I revised the course from a framing that emphasized racial progress and Black athletes' accomplishments and 'firsts,' toward a course that engaged with racial theories, media literacy, and intersectional racial justice. Doing so added rigor and relevance to the course, and it also challenged students in ways that the previous course had

not, resulting in our growing awareness of the need for a third course, as discussed below. When Dr. Hextrum was hired, she redesigned “Gender Issues.” The class content originally included little or no explanation of gender theory and instead unfolded as a semester-long explanation of Title IX enforcement. She went about revising this narrow (and inaccurate) conceptualization of the gender issues endemic to college sports by grounding the class in various feminist and queer theorists.

My next initiative was to work with the new faculty to change the IAA curricular requirements to include a social foundations course. Any one of three course options could fill this requirement: “Race and Ethnicity in Intercollegiate Athletics,” “Gender Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics,” or “Inclusive Praxis in Intercollegiate Athletics.” Reforming the curriculum to ensure all graduates of the IAA program would engage with social issues and theories in their coursework was an intervention borne of our belief that practitioners would need knowledge and tools in order to navigate systemic oppression in their own professional practice. Mandatory social justice or diversity coursework is both maligned and, at times, necessary for change. Enrollment in these courses prompted some students to seek justice and equity in their praxis as they entered the athletic department, through which they began to reform college sport itself.

I designed “Inclusive Praxis in Intercollegiate Athletics” specifically as the third option for the social foundations requirement so graduate students could acquire the *skills* to impact change. The need for this skill development workshop became clear to me because of experiences I had teaching “Race and Ethnicity in Intercollegiate Athletics” (formerly “Diversity in Sports”). The first time I taught “Diversity in Sports,” students shared that the content challenged them to reach new understandings of race and racism. Yet students also reflected that they lacked tools to *address* the problems they now recognized. In other words, students asked: “What do we do with this knowledge?” They expressed concern that, by simply working in sports, they might inevitably perpetuate racism and other forms of oppression. And they sincerely asked me, “What do we do? Are you saying we shouldn’t go into athletics administration?” This was not a question I anticipated. Through these interactions with students, I shared my belief that athletics needs critically-oriented practitioners who can (a) identify and understand racism within athletics, (b) work toward positive institutional change, and (c) mitigate racial harm, in ways both individual and systemic. I was also forced to recognize that my course, which exposed students to critical theory and research, nonetheless left them feeling inadequately prepared to incorporate this knowledge into their practitioner work. They could identify racism and systemic injustice, but they still did not have the tools to actually dismantle or interrupt racism as practitioners.

As a result of that uncomfortable realization myself, I developed the “Inclusive Praxis” course as a workshop focused on building specific skills around everything from bystander intervention to facilitation methods to equitable hiring practices. We also discussed how to navigate the practical daily challenges of this work in an early career, including power dynamics and students’ (reasonable) concern about keeping their jobs if/when they interrupt injustice. As important as it is to be grounded in scholarship and, more specifically, in *critical* scholarship, I learned that we also needed to train students with actionable skills. Students who intend to be practitioners will often be in positions to mitigate harm, so they need the tools to do so effectively. This is particularly important, given the tendency to treat newer professionals, as well as those with marginalized identities, as more equipped to approach these topics. There is a need for explicit

skill development regardless of students' positionality; for example, being a Black person does not mean a student necessarily knows specific histories, understands certain theories, or has the skills to effectively facilitate conversation. Yet untrained early career Practitioners of Color are often tasked with doing labor around these difficult topics (for example, see our discussion of *mission creep* within the Athletic Diversity Council in our article "A case of interest divergence" in this issue).

Several of the topics and tools from the inclusive praxis course have impacted my larger approach to training practitioners and the meaning I make out of both the successes and setbacks we experienced with these interventions. In particular, harm mitigation has become increasingly foundational to this work for me. As a scholar who studies inequity and oppression from the structural rather than individual perspectives, this has been a somewhat paradoxical shift. I still believe it is imperative that we understand and address the structural and power relations undergirding inequity; however, I also recognize the value of intervening on an individual level – and the potential for individual intervention to concretely prevent harm in a given circumstance.

### **Bridging our Interventions**

Through my experiences teaching "Race and Ethnicity in Intercollegiate Athletics" and designing "Inclusive Praxis," I saw the need to continue this work beyond the graduate curriculum. Similarly, previous work within athletics reinforced the necessity of explicit curricular preparation for graduate students. With the revised IAA curriculum, students were better prepared to understand social justice frameworks and implement equitable practices in athletic departments. However, IAA students were entering work environments in which their predecessors and supervisors had by and large not received similar training and, in many cases, were instead embracing and continuing to perpetuate the oppressive systems we taught about. As such, simply sending new professionals into these harmful and destructive athletic cultures with new knowledge was not enough; they were sent to enter those cultures and then either adopt them or have their careers limited by their lack of adherence. The most extreme cases would be those who got pushed out or departed the athletics field altogether.

As former students entered the profession, hungry to change long-standing white supremacist cultures, they described encountering units resistant to change. Through our conversations, they shared their frustrations with their athletic departments, which were untethered from critical praxis. They asked how they could implement critical curricular training in their units and in some cases attempted to do so themselves, with varying degrees of success. Therefore, in addition to ongoing training for early career and pre-professional practitioners, we realized targeted support for longer-standing administrators was also needed. Otherwise, athletic departments would continue to socialize new members of the organization into existing, harmful, racist cultures, ideologies, and practices. The need for ongoing training for current practitioners has been confirmed by research. Effective racial justice work is necessarily ongoing and most effective when done in the community and with organizational support (Adamian & Jayakumar, 2018). The counter-hegemonic movement sweeping the U.S. in the summer of 2020 provided an opportunity to implement ongoing, effective, critical racial justice work for current athletic practitioners. The next section, narrated by Dr. Hextrum, describes this intervention.



## **Intervention 2: An Anti-Racist Book Club (ABC) for Intercollegiate Athletics Practitioners (Dr. Kirsten Hextrum)**

In May 2020, I was in conversation with the OU Athletics Diversity Committee (ADC) about how to provide racial justice training for staff and support for Black students. OU Athletics leadership felt a renewed need for such trainings in light of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), high-profile examples of Black athlete activism, and calls for greater attention to the racial inequities plaguing college sports (Cooper et al., 2023). In collaboration with Dr. Dolores Christensen, the chair of the OU ADC and licensed sports psychologist, we piloted a five-week summer workshop series to (re)educate the primarily white coaches and staff on the workings of structural racism in athletics and train participants to incorporate racial justice practices in their units.<sup>1</sup>

As discussed below, OU Athletics gave me full autonomy to design the curriculum and implement the programming. However, the athletic department maintained its control of the promotion, branding, and naming of the events. Despite my fervent desire to name the workshop series with explicit racial justice language, they insisted the series title reference the summer's *anti-racist book club zeitgeist* (Johnson, 2020). Even when I explained (a) the performative (and therefore ineffective) reputation associated with white book clubs (Johnson, 2020) and (b) that our workshops would not use a central book as our curriculum, the athletics administrators were intransigent about keeping the "Anti-racist Book Club" and "ABC" branding. This initial conflict exemplifies the tension between the series' critical content and the white supremacist organizing tendencies undergirding athletics, as well as the delicate art of negotiating those tensions. For example, in refusing to run it as book club, I challenged and pushed the department to be more critical, but the invitation to do this work was contingent on the branding, so I ceded that point.<sup>2</sup>

Initial interest was approximately 40 participants. We invited Sara Grummert, then a PhD candidate at the University of California, Riverside (who now has a doctoral degree) and an emerging expert on whiteness in intercollegiate athletics. While my coauthor and other Faculty of Color had strong relationships with OU athletics, three white women scholars – Dr. Christensen, Dr. Grummert, and myself – intentionally took responsibility for the labor to design and implement ABC in order to contravene the frequent *diversity penalty* imposed on Scholars of Color (Quaye et al., 2020).<sup>3</sup> The intervention also unfolded during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global disaster that exacerbated the racialized inequitable workloads in higher education (Simien & Wallace, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> See the article "A case of interest divergence" in this issue for more depth on the origin of ABC programming.

<sup>2</sup> ABC was not the only time faculty from the College of Education have been tasked with leading DEI initiatives for Athletics and faced conflicting or counterproductive branding efforts. An event intended to provide a platform for Black athletes to speak frankly to white administrators was rebranded as "Humanity Talks." As another example, OU athletics also insisted on using the settler-valorizing nomenclature of "Sooners," as well as the attendant mascots, throughout DEI marketing materials, despite our frequent and substantive objections. Our critical scholarship contributed to ABC's effectiveness while also being a source of discomfort for those in athletics. These tensions are of interest for future research: How do we sustain engagement in trainings that challenge core norms of the organization? What areas of practice continue to resist implementing changes, even after extensive education?

<sup>3</sup> The ABC program—and our research on it—intentionally inverted traditionally problematic racial dynamics in the researcher-subject relationship as Dr. Haslerig, a biracial Black woman, took the lead on the research, whereas Dr. Hextrum, a white woman designed and implemented the anti-racist trainings.

ABC aimed to educate primarily white coaches and staff about institutionalized racism in and out of sport, and how to best serve a diverse student population. To achieve this goal, we designed a five-week series by creating a syllabus, diverse activities, and breakout/small group discussions. The series occurred via Zoom, both to achieve pandemic safety protocols and to ensure participants could engage in this content away from their workplace and/or in a safe and quiet space.

Both the content and pedagogy were grounded in CWS. As one example, we ensured that any knowledge about race and racism shared in the series emanated from Black scholars and activists because those who are most harmed by oppression and have worked to dismantle inequality have the truest view of the manifestations of power (Collins, 2005). For instance, rather than drawing on white scholar Robin DiAngelo's work to describe white privilege, we centered Black scholars' writing in this area, e.g., W.E.B. DuBois (Black reconstruction), Cheryl Harris (whiteness as property), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (intersectionality). As white facilitators, we were explicit that we were not the authorities on race and racism. Our class experts were the Black authors and speakers featured throughout the series. Our role was to push the mostly white participants to engage in the content provided by Black scholars and activists.

We also recognized that DEI trainings are often undercut by their temporary, periodic, and mandatory formats (Quaye et al., 2020). Despite the department's enthusiasm for ABC, we were clear that no one could be mandated to participate. We also were clear that ABC must be on-going and sequential, encouraging participants to volunteer to attend the first, and every subsequent session, to continually (re)build their knowledge base. We also departed from many anti-racist workshops and programs that train white people to identify their own racist biases, actions, and tendencies (Cabrera, 2018). CWS critiques such practices as (re)centering whiteness, perpetuating narratives of white victimhood, and doing little to improve the material lives of People of Color (Cabrera, 2018; Leonardo, 2009). Instead, we utilized CWS to train practitioners to foster a lifelong professional praxis committed to mitigating racism in their organization.

Along with chairing the OU Athletics Diversity Committee, Dr. Christensen is an adjunct instructor for the IAA program. As such, we both had experience teaching current and future athletic coaches, staff, and administrators. We drew on these experiences to select a range of topics for our pilot program. We decided that this series should review the foundations of racism in the U.S. Topics in the first series included reviewing the history of U.S. enslavement and colonialism; discussing various iterations of white supremacist ideology; and considering the link between racism and meritocracy. We designed a syllabus for the summer and required participants to read it before each session (see Table 2 for a sample syllabus). Prior to each session, I met with Drs. Christensen and Grummert to review the possible themes of the day and brainstorm activities and discussion questions. I began each session with a brief lecture on the day's content to build common and collective background knowledge on a core theme of the week. Next, we posed several discussion questions related to the week's topics. We gave participants a few minutes to sit quietly, reflect, and gather their thoughts. We then entered three, randomly assigned breakout rooms led by Drs. Christensen, Grummert, and myself. As breakout room leaders, our role was to facilitate the discussion and push participants to engage with the course readings and topics. We then returned to the main Zoom room and had each group share what occurred in their breakout room. We then facilitated a large group discussion, seeking common themes across the breakout

groups. I concluded the session with a “preview” for next week where I discussed how each reading related to the upcoming unit. This is a practice I use in classes, so students have a framework to engage with the texts.

**Table 2***Representative Examples from ABC Syllabi*

<b>SUMMER 2020</b>		
<b>Topic</b>	<b>Overview</b>	<b>Readings and Engagements</b>
<b>July 14<sup>th</sup></b> “I Don’t See Color”: Colorblindness as Racism	This week we consider one manifestation of racism in the current era: colorblindness. This form of racism characterizes the apolitical, race-neutral discourse pervasive throughout sports and works to deny the real harms of racism facing Athletes of Color and the real privileges white people accrue.	--Letter from a Birmingham Jail on the white moderate --Bimper Jr., A.Y. (2015). Lifting the veil: Exploring colorblind racism in Black Student Athlete Experiences. <i>Journal of Sport and Social Issues</i> , 39(3), 225-243
<b>July 28<sup>th</sup></b> Launching Forward: The case for reparations	In our final week of the summer we will consider how to address the intertwined racial and economic systems characterizing American capitalism and college sports. We will examine the case for reparations as one possible solution, discussing its possibilities and constraints.	--Coates, T-N. (2014 June). The Case for Reparations. <i>The Atlantic</i> . -- <a href="#">Athlete activism</a> , <i>The Undefeated</i> .
<b>FALL 2020</b>		
<b>September 15<sup>th</sup></b> “Shut up and Dribble”: Activism in Sport	Our first week introduces participants to the history of Black sport activist. In doing so, we consider how supremacy manifests in society, how Black communities have struggled against white supremacy, and how sport provides an ambiguous platform to retrench and resist racism.	--Smith, J. M. (2009). “It’s Not Really My Country”: Lew Alcindor and the Revolt of the Black Athlete. <i>Journal of Sport History</i> , 36(2), 223-244. --We Charge Genocide. (2014 September). <i>We charge genocide: Police violence against Chicago’s Youth of Color</i> . --Players of the Pac-12 (2020 August 2). <a href="#">#WeAreUnited</a> . <i>The Players Tribune</i> .
<b>Oct 6<sup>th</sup></b> In/Hyper-Visible Athletes: Black Women’s Contradictory Athletic Experiences	Racism sharply divides America into those who benefit from and those who are harmed by supremacy. Black Americans have long self-identified as a collective through their shared experiences with racial discrimination and efforts to undo said	-- <a href="#">Statement by Combahee River Collective</a> --Oluo, J. (2018). <i>So you want to talk about race</i> . Seal Press. Chapter 5: What is

	discrimination. But the power of racism is its varied manifestations. As race encounters other modes of oppression such as class, gender, and sexuality, the manifestations of discrimination morph and multiply. This week we center the experiences of Black women to investigate the contradictions, complexities, and multiplicitous dimensions of harm that result at the intersection of race and gender.	intersectionality and why do I need it? --Newman, B. (2018 September 11). <a href="#">The long history behind the racist attacks on Serena Williams. Why Women bear the brunt of racist depictions.</a>
<b>SPRING 2021</b>		
<b>March 10<sup>th</sup></b> Celebrating Women's History Month: Black women athlete activists	This week we are focusing on Black women's activist movements and how they have and continue to manifest in/through sport. We will be paying particular attention to not only the erasure of Black feminist politics in sport, but also what revolutionary aspirations often get lost when attempting to combat that erasure. In other words, we aim to foreground the radical political projects and theorizing that drive and exist within Black feminisms, rather than solely highlighting individual activists.	--Radicalizing Feminisms from "The Movement" Era. In <i>Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics</i> by Joy James -- <a href="#">Joy James Conversation</a> -- <a href="#">How Black Women Athletes Paved the Way for the NBA Strike</a> -- <a href="#">Kelly Loeffler Doesn't Belong in the WNBA</a>
<b>April 14<sup>th</sup></b> Diversity in the workplace, Part I: How white supremacy aids and abets white advancement and retention in athletics	In response to participant feedback, we will provide two workshops discussing the overrepresentation of white people, and especially white men, in athletic leadership. We will begin with an overview of how white supremacy normalizes white people's advancement and retention within athletics. We will examine how the access and opportunity structure for athletics employment, hiring considerations, and climate favor those from white communities. We will also consider the relational impact of white supremacy in that white advantage always comes at the expense and harm of People of Color. We will consider how athletic departments designed to elevate white people multiply the difficulties facing those from Communities of Color to access, ascend, and thrive within college athletic employment.	--Cooper, J. N., Nwadike, A., & Macaulay, C. (2017). A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Big-Time College Sports: Implications for Culturally Responsive and Race-Conscious Sport Leadership. <i>Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics</i> , 10, 204-233. --Peruse TIDES " <a href="#">race and gender reports</a> " on professional sports, international sports, and sports media. --Flattery, C. (2020 October 21). <a href="#">The souls of Black professors</a> . Inside Higher Ed.

After each session, Drs. Christensen, Grummert, and I met to debrief. We discussed the prominent topics that arose, what problems participants encountered when engaging with the texts, signs of white guilt, immunity, or defensiveness (Cabrera, 2018; Fields, 2001; Leonardo, 2009), and how best to combat these. We used our debrief sessions to plan for the following week.

### **The Year-Long Program**

At the end of the first workshop series (summer 2020), Drs. Christensen, Grummert, and I designed a participant survey. We sought insights from participants about their overall experience, asked for any feedback that could inform future workshops, requested their insights on what worked well/what could be improved, and asked how likely it would be for them to participate in future series. We disseminated the survey to anyone who attended at least one session. The surveys with participants yielded overwhelming support to continue to do this work and to keep the format relatively consistent. We communicated the survey results to OU's athletic leadership team and asked if we could continue the programming into the 2020-2021 academic year in a virtual format. OU Athletics supported our work and said they would continue to advertise our workshops to staff. Drs. Christensen, Grummert, and I spent August designing a fall workshop series. We also met several times to discuss what we learned from this first series and what could be improved for future work. Our conversations led to four major takeaways, which we used to design the year-long series.

First, we felt that the summer series drifted from its original mandate: responding to the murder of George Floyd and corresponding BLM movements. Each week was intended to relate BLM to athletics, but throughout the summer the conversations more often centered on athletic-specific concerns such as the lack of racial diversity in athletic staff. We recognized this drift but were encouraged because participants were still discussing a facet of racism. In preparing for the fall, we decided to scaffold the entire series with a focus on the tenets of BLM. We opened with athlete activism as an entry point to remind the participants about what racism is and what forms of activism have been successful in combating it. We closed the series with a discussion on carcerality, introducing participants to the specific ways that prisons, incarceration, and criminal justice produce racism and coordinate across institutions to institute carceral logics.

Second, we found the unique experiences of Black women were too often erased or diminished. The topics and examples raised by participants, instead, centered on Black men's experiences. We debated about how best to ensure Black women were heard in this space and concluded that we needed dedicated weeks to discuss topics particular to their experience (Carter-Francique et al., 2013; 2017; Ferguson, 2023). We created two weeks to discuss intersectionality. In the first week, the goal was to explore how Black women are both hyper- and in-visible in athletics. In the next week, we reviewed the Black transwomen's experience in sport as a way to explore race-based gender violence and surveillance.

Third, the readings and topics framed racism (accurately) as institutional and structural. However, participants often minimized athletics' institutional role in racism. They could recognize the markers of institutional racism in some areas, i.e., in housing, education, and politics, but often skirted the markers of institutional racism in their own workplace: intercollegiate athletics. As one example, while we were engaging in the summer workshop series, OU athletics returned football

and men's basketball to campus to train in the midst of the global pandemic. The university made national news for the number of players who caught COVID-19 and the inadequate institutional safeguards in place. When pressed on the racialized dynamic of which staff would most benefit from the return to play (predominately white) and which athletes would be most harmed (predominately Black), workshop participants denied the institutionalized mechanisms at work. Instead, they either avoided the topic altogether or cited the existing safeguards in place to diminish further COVID-19 spread. Building upon this experience, we designed the fall workshop series to incorporate weekly readings on the specific manifestations of institutionalized racism within intercollegiate athletics. We also added a topic on sport and colonialism to discuss Oklahoma's role in the attempted eradication of Native peoples and the continued harm the university enacts by using colonial symbols in their athletic mascots.

Finally, we observed that participants often minimized institutional racism by demanding "practical" solutions to the problems we described. We also felt that underneath this demand was a real desire to make a change in their daily lives. We decided to conclude each week by featuring a Black-owned business. We encouraged participants to modify their personal and professional habits to redistribute resources away from white-owned businesses and toward Black-owned establishments.

Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, we hosted a total of 12 workshops. We also expanded the programming in Spring 2021, hosting three sessions collaboratively with Kansas State University. This idea arose from our fall series as ABC participants kept asking how their colleagues at other institutions grappled with similar issues and questions. Throughout the year, we preserved our CWS roots and extended our theory of change. We kept the curriculum rooted in the perspectives and experiences of those most harmed by racism, incorporated intersectional perspectives and theories, and pushed participants to consider their own role in perpetuating racism and as change agents. We also continued our evaluation practice, conducting a total of three surveys throughout the year and completing qualitative interviews with a subset of participants in Summer 2021. Participants overwhelmingly had positive reflections on ABC and asked for more programming. However, we were unable to continue the programming in 2021-2022 (see "A case of interest divergence" in this issue for a full explanation). In the next section, we discuss our vision for how ABC could better integrate with IAA's curriculum, expand to additional institutions, and remain sustainable.

### **The Unfinished Work of Our Racial Justice Initiatives**

CWS advises that anti-racist approaches be endemic and ongoing (Cabrera, 2018). Therefore, the interventions we presented, i.e., curricular changes to IAA and yearlong programming within athletics, are insufficient. We recognize the need to continually revisit our curriculum, revising courses and pedagogy while creating new classes and content. Similarly, anti-racist programming for practitioners must be embedded in organizations – ideally a daily praxis – to gain traction. Based on experience, we attempted to design ongoing curricular and programming efforts but were unsuccessful in our implementation. We share our vision and constraints here for others to adapt in their own classrooms, graduate programs, and/or athletic departments.

## Proposed Evolution of ABC

Throughout our yearlong ABC initiative in 2020-21, we knew we would need additional institutional support to maintain and grow the program. The program evolved into an almost full-fledged course, with the intellectual and emotional labor needed to keep our standards and commitment to quality and racial equity. Creating cultural change requires application. As insiders/outsiders, we were limited in our impact on athletic departments. However, peer learning and leadership have the potential to bridge those limits and benefit the organization (Lave & Wenger, 1991). With these constraints and possibilities in mind, we envisioned a praxis series where participants would apply the curriculum by examining and discussing specific scenarios that occur in their workplaces. Our proposed praxis series was informed by the lessons from Dr. Haslerig's course. Our hope was to develop a facilitator training program to recruit and educate athletic practitioners to lead both the workshop series and praxis meetings. The combination of content-specific, ongoing training designed by faculty experts and praxis workshops led by qualified practitioners could have provided multiple, sustained, and expansive opportunities for racial justice education throughout the organization.

Through the facilitator training program, practitioners would be taught to identify, disrupt, and redirect interpersonal and institutional racism. Training others within the athletic department to facilitate would have been invaluable for building the capacity of the partnership, cementing its sustainability, and – perhaps most importantly – increasing athletics' responsibility for this work so we could have continued to partner. This level of change not only needs repeated interaction and intervention; it also requires ongoing assessment and evaluation geared toward program improvement. Our praxis series would also need trained evaluators who could monitor the program's feedback and provide ongoing support to the facilitators. In doing all of the above, our hope was to cultivate a "community of practice," one that accommodates our overlapping areas of expertise to create a new community and that is committed to shared knowledge and participation with each other's cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

In sum, to maintain ABC, we developed a proposal for a multi-year grant to support the sustainability of the collaboration, expand and deepen the programming, and study its impact. We planned to continue the faculty-led twice-monthly workshop series, develop an accompanying praxis series and a training series for new practitioner-facilitators, and implement iterative multi-method program evaluation and improvement. The vision and implementation of ABC were largely unfunded and done in our own time, unpaid (see article "A case of interest divergence" in this issue for elaboration on contradictions and challenges on unfunded/under-funded anti-racist work). We sought various funding and institutional support to make our vision a reality; none of those efforts were successful. Athletics and the College of Education were both supportive of compensation for our labor – as long as the *other* entity would fund it. Funding would have offset the immense labor in designing, maintaining, and studying the program. We also saw funding – whether in the form of direct payment, a negotiated course buyout, or through some other mechanism – as vital to demonstrating OU athletics' investment in anti-racist programming beyond performativity (Cooper et al., 2023). Sustainable programming required intentional capacity-building to have more and/or larger groups, include more institutions, build expertise and capacity *within* athletics, and free JRCoE faculty to share their expertise in generative ways with the partner organization, rather than perpetually serving as uncompensated facilitation labor.

## Implications

Racial harm produced *within* athletics is often rendered invisible by athletics' prominent position as a site of racial integration in the popular imagination (Hextrum, 2020a; 2020b). Nonetheless, the reality of racial harm within athletics has material consequences for both the lived experiences and ultimate outcomes for college athletes. Although it is not a panacea, implementing targeted training on racial justice issues within athletics for practitioners is one aspect of any robust plan to address the severity of these issues and mitigate their negative impact on college athletes. Robust research on such programming is essential to evidence-based decision-making, program improvement, and the generation of scholarly knowledge.

In this article, we shared the design, implementation, and future vision of two interventions aimed at disrupting white supremacy in college sports organizations: (a) revising course content and program requirements for a graduate concentration in intercollegiate athletics administration and (b) developing ongoing anti-racist programming for athletics staff and administrators. We also acknowledge challenges in ensuring these efforts are replicable and sustainable. Although our interventions have been limited by institutional, cultural, and structural factors (those faced by ABC are discussed in depth in our article "A case of interest divergence" in this issue), we believe our theory of change could (and should) be applied by other institutions.

First, we suggest an audit and revision of the graduate curriculum to ensure critical approaches are interwoven through all courses. In our experience, the graduate curriculum may espouse commitments to diversity work and/or display that the classes engage with equity concepts, but including these words and phrases is a far step from implementing critical theory and research in the course content and methods. Furthermore, naming classes with certain critical language, and not delivering this content, *performs* diversity while obscuring systemic inequality (Leonardo, 2009). We recommend faculty who teach athletics-centric courses or seek to develop intercollegiate athletics concentrations ensure that they meaningfully incorporate critical theories in their course design and pedagogy.

Second, in the span of one class, it can be difficult to expose students to critical approaches and train them how to put theory into practice. While implementing critical programming, we suggest faculty prioritize exposing students to ways to enact change in their future careers. Initiating praxis courses, series, or discussions is vital to live up to the philosophy of critical theory (as most espouse moving beyond critique to activism, see Leonardo, 2009) and ensure we retain critical and diverse practitioners in the athletics profession.

Third, partnerships with faculty and athletics are rare and difficult but can produce transformational change if institutionally sponsored. Throughout this article, we offered lessons on how faculty could design an ongoing and sustainable model of anti-racist praxis in their units in partnership with athletic departments. However, such programming requires that faculty and facilitators' time, labor, and expertise be valued and compensated.

Lastly, we argue that the value of this anti-racist work persists despite its imperfection and impermanence. Although we are, of course, interested in developing effective programming and demonstrating the impact of our theory of change, we also recognize that harm reduction is an



ever-present goal that can be accomplished even in the midst of limitations and failures. Given the impact of harm reduction on individuals, we believe we have an obligation to keep implementing anti-racist interventions, even when the programming is inevitably temporary.

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