

## **A Case of Interest Divergence: An Athletic Department's Anti-racist Book Club**

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*Abstract:* In this article, we present the implementation and eventual dissolution of anti-racist programming within one athletic department as an exemplar case. The anti-racist programming represented the potential of a counter-hegemonic effort to disrupt white supremacy in athletic organizations. It also represented a unique partnership between faculty and athletic practitioners. Throughout this article, we present the context of the case, discuss the challenges and opportunities of anti-racist programming, and describe the programming's dissolution. We frame our accounts and observations through the Critical Race Theories of interest convergence, divergence, and imperialist reclamation (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Nishi, 2022). We conclude with implications for higher education activists interested in engaging in similar efforts at their institutions.

*Keywords:* Critical Race Theory, interest convergence, interest divergence, imperialist reclamation, anti-racist programming, anti-CRT movements

### **Anti-Racist Programming in Intercollegiate Athletics**

In our article “Interventions in Support of Anti-racist Praxis in Athletics” published in this special issue, we detailed the theory of change behind two anti-racist interventions for athletics practitioners. One intervention changed a graduate curriculum while the other was a year-long anti-racist professional development series for intercollegiate athletics coaches, staff, and administrators. In this article, we center the establishment and dissolution of the anti-racist professional development series, marketed as the *Anti-racist Book Club (ABC)* by the athletic department. As discussed in the previous article, ABC arose through the strong, long-term working relationship between faculty in an intercollegiate athletic concentration of a graduate program and an athletic department. Our previous article alluded to the dissolution of the programming due to ideological misalignments and inadequate institutional funding. The program's promise and eventual demise, we believe, illustrates how interest convergence, divergence, and imperialist reclamation undermine racial justice work in higher education.

In building our case, we discuss the broader context – both nationally and institutionally – that spawned the anti-racist programming. We introduce the specifics of our case: a partnership between a graduate program focused on intercollegiate athletic administration (IAA) and athletics practitioners, both housed at the University of Oklahoma (OU). OU is both an exemplary and an

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exceptional case. As a member of the Big 12 Conference<sup>1</sup>, it has a long history of winning conference and national championships. It is also a part of “Big-Time” athletics, with budgets and revenues exceeding \$100 million annually. OU Athletics’ public prominence, both regionally and nationally, positions the department as a potential leader in the field. As we discuss in greater detail here, instances of white supremacy and counter-movements for racial justice at OU have taken on national importance. The partnership between our graduate program and the athletic department also makes OU a somewhat exceptional case. OU has one of the few graduate programs nested in a School of Education with faculty who specialize in critically examining intercollegiate athletics administration. Here, we share insights about how our partnership emerged and evolved while working toward racial justice in college sports and broader society.

Our case is situated in various Critical Race Theories (CRT), namely interest convergence, divergence, and imperialist reclamation (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Nishi, 2022) to showcase a cycle we encountered in our racial justice work. We document: (1) how counter-hegemonic movements arise to combat white supremacy, (2) how such movements can become co-opted by hegemonic interests to preserve the status quo all while performing diversity work, (3) how the aims of institutionalists and insurgents diverge, (4) how insurgent efforts are stymied, and (5) how white supremacy expands its reach and territory following counter-hegemonic movements. In recounting this cycle, we do not offer a determinative account. Rather, we remain hopeful that such efforts can be impactful, at least on the individual level, even as we recognize and detail the challenges these theories predicted.

### **Context, Relationship(s), and Researchers’ Positionality**

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) Master of Education (MEd) program. IAA prepares aspiring athletic practitioners, including approximately 40 students who also hold graduate assistantships (GAs) in OU Athletics every year. Drs. Hextrum and Haslerig directed the concentration and taught in IAA for most of their faculty careers (see “Interventions in Support of Anti-racist Praxis in Athletics” in this special issue).

As researchers of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in intercollegiate athletics, we have professional expertise on the various manifestations of power, inequality, and hierarchies cultivated throughout college sports (e.g., Haslerig, 2017; Haslerig et al., 2019; 2020; Hextrum, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2023). We have frequently delivered ad hoc presentations within athletics in support of DEI, including on behalf of the Athletics Diversity Council (ADC) and as Didactics for Athletics’ psychological services (PROS) interns. Next, we discuss the history of racist incidents and racial justice programming at OU and within OU Athletics. Importantly, the development of ABC depended on our expertise and relationships built over time, predating the moment of extreme interest convergence that enabled the implementation of the more comprehensive program.

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted ABC while OU belonged to the Big 12 conference. As part of the larger conference realignment and pursuit of ever-larger television revenue, OU left the Big 12 and joined the Southeastern Conference in 2024.

## History of Racial Justice Programming in OU Athletics

OU Athletics designed the ADC program in the early 2000s to create entry-level opportunities for People of Color to gain high-quality practical experience in athletics administration as GAs. *Interest convergence* illuminates the origin of ADC. The program responded to concerns that a nearly entirely white workforce oversaw the extraction of the exploited labor of Black revenue athletes. Bringing more “diversity” into athletics could lessen the visual manifestation of college programs running as plantations – with white coaches and administrators disciplining, controlling, and profiting from unpaid Black laborers (Hawkins, 2010). Programs that create entry-level positions for People of Color were and remain common across higher education. Invariably, “focusing on the pipeline offers incomplete solutions to a complex problem” (Griffin, 2019, p. 275). These programs are designed to admit *token* People of Color into the organization to claim the unit has diversity (Nishi, 2022). However, that conception of diversity is limited to *numerical diversity* (Nishi, 2022), and representation alone cannot reform an institution. Numerical diversity is important; but it is a precondition not a solution for dismantling white supremacy (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Gusa, 2010; Nishi, 2022). Furthermore, these programs often limit People of Color’s mobility – routing them toward careers with little advancement opportunities or inadequate mentorship (Gusa, 2010; Nishi, 2022). Lastly, pipeline programs usually only address the entrance to the organization, while failing to contend with leaks along the pipeline. This results in (a) failure to add meaningful numeric diversity (i.e., a revolving door) and (b) further overconcentration at the entry level. OU athletics reflected these pitfalls. Twenty years into the ADC program the organization had failed to meaningfully counter the overrepresentation of white administrators, particularly at the higher levels (in 2020, 81% of all OU athletics staff identified as white).

The ADC program within OU athletics encountered another common issue in higher education: mission creep (Gonzales, 2012; 2013). Over the years, the program morphed to address a secondary problem within the athletic department – inadequate diversity training and preparation of staff. ADC graduate assistants were in turn tasked with organizing (and in some cases implementing) ongoing staff development on diversity. ADC faced two conflicting imperatives: providing a career pathway into athletics for underrepresented populations and running professional development programs on topics related to DEI. These two imperatives are often in conflict, as the secondary purpose creates problematic labor expectations for untrained ADC interns and does not ensure high-quality programming. It also aligns with white institutional interests, as the department can claim they participate in practices like “inclusive excellence” or “diversity initiatives” without dismantling whiteness or supporting a critical mass of People of Color joining the organization (Nishi, 2022). In contrast, the interventions – IAA curricular changes, ad hoc workshops, and ABC – drew upon faculty members’ content and pedagogical expertise, and, in doing so, explicitly challenged the racist foundations and organizational imperatives of the athletic department.

The regional and campus context of OU also enabled and informed our anti-racist interventions. A series of racist incidents rocked OU over the past eight years (see Figure 1), both localizing and underscoring the urgency of the concurrent national Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. OU Athletics had an important – and sometimes outsized – role in the student and institutional responses to these incidents. Furthermore, because we had pre-existing and ongoing

relationships with the athletics department and key stakeholders, we were uniquely positioned to partner with them on this anti-racist programming – and we were able to do so quickly in response to the renewed urgency of racial justice work during summer 2020.

**Table 1**

*Non-exhaustive list of anti-Black incidents, organizing, and institutional responses at the University of Oklahoma*

	<b>Anti-Black incident and/or Black organizing</b>	<b>IAA, athlete, and/or athletic dept. response and/or involvement</b>	<b>Institutional Response(s) and/or contemporaneous changes</b>
<b>August 2014</b>	Nationwide protests following Michael Brown’s killing; conspicuously little organizing in Oklahoma		
<b>Fall 2014</b>	Ongoing <i>OU Unheard</i> protests and organizing by Black Students		Lack of institutional response, despite extensive college paper coverage
<b>March 2015</b>	SAE video leaks, fraternity singing racist chant that includes racial slur and lynching allusions; makes national news and garners response from President Obama	-Athlete Eric Striker releases response video on social media, national sport media coverage -Football cancels Spring practice and marches -Black athletes are invited to sit down with then-university president Boren	-Expulsion of chant-leaders -Eviction of fraternity chapter (suspension by the national org) -Statements condemning -Institute mandatory, one-time diversity experience training for incoming undergraduates -Creation of “Office for University Community”
<b>2015-16</b>	Trump campaign and subsequent election.		
<b>2018</b>	New university president, Gallogly; immediate layoffs and deep cuts; tensions with those serving traditionally marginalized and/or minoritized groups, insecurity about university support		
<b>Spring 2019</b>	Three blackface incidents; Protests and formation of Black Emergency Response Team (BERT)	-Athletics’ all-staff meeting, organization of internal athlete affinity groups	-University town hall, public calls for Gallogly resignation
<b>Summer 2019</b>	Gallogly steps down, Harroz named interim university president		
<b>Fall 2020</b>	-Trump passes executive order banning CRT		-Search of inaugural OU VP for Diversity and Inclusion

<b>Jan-Feb 2020</b>	-Two faculty use racial slurs in class, no meaningful reprisal -Protests, sit in, & BERT demands (i.e., faculty training and provost firing)	-Some athletes participate in BERT protests	-Harroz meets with BERT -Commitment to required faculty diversity training (implemented online starting Fall2020) and full DEI course for freshmen (in development)
<b>May 2020</b>	International protests following police murder of George Floyd; little organizing in Oklahoma		
<b>Summer 2020</b>	Ongoing nation-wide BLM protests	-Athletics encourages attendance at BLM march, several team-specific protests & unity marches -"ABC" workshop series begins	-Harroz named as university president (without national search) -Provost steps down
<b>AY2020-2021</b>	Spring 2021- OK legislature passes 1775 (anti-CRT bill)	-Fall and Spring iterations of ABC -Spring 2021 ABC expands programming to Kansas State -OU athletics initiates hiring process for first athletics-specific DEI officer.	-New institutional equity officer starts in Fall2020 -Search begins for Director of Gateway Course & Ranked Renewable Term instructors
<b>Summer 2021</b>		-OU Athletics hires an Associate Athletic Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)	-Announce alternative Gateway to Belonging courses to avoid violating Oklahoma House Bill 1775
<b>AY2021-22</b>		-New Assoc AD of DEI brings programming in-house, implements changes in contravention of ABC theory of change	-Ongoing critique of Gateway implementation, including from instructors; Gateway course begins
<b>Summer 2022</b>			-Announcement that all communication must go through the central DEI office -Auditing and censoring of units' diversity statements, etc.

*Note:* Limited to Fall 2014 onward, when the first of our co-authors arrived at OU.

After the January 2019 blackface incidents, OU Athletics Department held an all-staff and college athlete Town Hall. Athletes of Color requested a space to connect with one another about shared experiences as minoritized students at a predominantly white institution. Support for this kind of space was immediate. Athletes' second request – a space for white athletes to meaningfully address their own role in (re)creating racism – was more difficult to implement. Due to their

respective expertise, Drs. Christensen and Hextrum facilitated the “White Allies Antiracism” group dedicated to dismantling white supremacy in college sport. Over the year, Drs. Christensen and Hextrum organized and shared materials for a white athlete allyship program, grounded in racial justice research and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS).

The white athlete ally program faced a major challenge: student efforts were undercut by power relationships within the athletic department. Coaches, staff, and administrators were unaware of, and at times unwilling to engage in, racial justice work. We invited OU athletics staff to voluntarily attend our meetings, but they declined. Athletes also said that when they attempted to discuss racial justice with their teams during or outside of practice, their efforts were rebuffed or shut down. They were told that practice should focus on athletic-specific topics such as proper form when tackling. These tactics by coaches demonstrate how race-neutral discourse is deployed to inaccurately position athletics as free from racialized processes. Race-neutral discourses allow white individuals and organizations to evade culpability in the racialized experiences of athletes and abdicate responsibility for ameliorating racial harm (both generally and that which is specific to athletics; Hextrum, 2020a; 2021). Hearing athletes recount these stories showed us the extreme need to intervene at the staff and administrator levels. Without that parallel intervention with practitioners, empowering white athletes to become allies was insufficient to create racial change in athletic department cultures.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, Drs. Christensen and Hextrum had ongoing discussions about how to develop racial programming for athletic coaches, staff, and administrators. Yet, with our more-than-full-time jobs and an apathetic (and sometimes resistant) OU administration, we could not build the momentum needed to establish regular, ongoing workshops for coaches and staff. In May 2020, following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, college athletes across the nation demanded that athletic departments facilitate interracial dialogue between Black college athletes and the overwhelmingly white athletic staff; implement critically and empirically grounded racial justice training for white athletic staff; and create departmentally-sponsored spaces to address systemic racism in intercollegiate athletic programs. This form of activism in college sports reflects how athletes use their broader social standing and status to pressure administrators to change the structure, policy, or practice of athletic departments (Cooper et al., 2023a). The combination of recurrent police murders and Black athlete activism convinced OU athletics to finally implement critical racial justice workshops. Thus, the ABC program arose from those calls and the long-term relationship(s) between OU athletics and the IAA graduate program.

### **Theory: Interest Convergence/Divergence**

2020 laid bare the ongoing racial injustices and inequities within the United States, thereby creating an opening to deepen and expand racial justice initiatives across all terrains of social life, especially sports. An unprecedented number of Black college athletes (53%) participated in some form of racial justice protest between the summer of 2020 and winter of 2021 (Cooper et al., 2023b). Additionally, college athletes used their platform to draw attention to inequities within sport and beyond, linking their racial exploitation in athletics to broader racial violence (Cooper et al., 2023a). Recurring and unprosecuted killings by police, and other state-sanctioned violence against Black people, reinvigorated and expanded the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement while

the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately ravaged Black and Brown communities. Moreover, the Trump campaign and presidency (2015-2020) mainstreamed white supremacist discourse and violence, stoking white grievance about minority advancement and reviving eugenics-era theories about inherent racial difference (Leonardo, 2020). Trump's 2020 defeat further emboldened and radicalized this backlash.

The resurgence of BLM in 2020 was often referred to as a “racial reckoning” that would allegedly usher in an enduring societal correction. In hindsight, the summer of 2020 unfolded through the logics and power dynamics of *interest convergence*, later setting up an *interest divergence* (Bell, 1980) and imperialist reclamation (Nishi, 2022; Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). Bell's (1980) notion of *interest convergence* contends that “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (p. 523). Key to Bell's theory is the notion of accommodation. The portions of racial equity that align with white interests will never offer true racial equality because such effort “threatens the superior societal status of middle- and upper-class Whites” (p. 523). Instead, the accommodations resemble an “appearance” of racial justice; an appearance that must be legible and laudable to white-dominant society (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Thus, when racial equity is approached through the logic of *interest convergence*, the resulting changes are always incomplete, temporary (Bell, 1980), and, as Guinier (2004) found, often stigmatizing to racial minorities.

*Interest convergence* also establishes the conditions for a subsequent *interest divergence*. Divergence arises “when Whites in power decide that the interest convergence balance is no longer tipped far enough in their favor, interests diverge and there is severe backlash and power grab by Whites” (Nishi, 2022, p. 250). Convergence/divergence need not unfold linearly. Interest divergence can originate from white people who felt left out of the original convergence, as was the case with poor, rural, and working-class whites during the Civil Rights Movement (Guinier, 2004). Poor white backlash to the Civil Rights movement occurred concurrently with racial liberalism and progressive reform (Guinier, 2004). Thompson Dorsey and Venzant Chambers' (2014) notion of *imperialistic reclamation* also speaks to the concurrent racial process of re-establishing white supremacy in and through interest convergence. Imperialistic reclamation names how white people seize back – and extend – their power over racial minorities, as infamously exemplified by the concept of “Make America Great Again.”

Summer 2020 saw the greatest racial uprising since the Civil Rights movement. Yet, like the Civil Rights movement, BLM's vision of racial justice – predicated on the demand that all US institutions recognize and support Black people as fully human – misaligned with white elites' interests (i.e., to maintain white control, authority, and dominance over American life). The modest yet powerful call of BLM – that *Black Lives Matter* across all aspects of society – proved too threatening to white supremacy. In this case, we discuss how we attempted to enact BLM in one athletic department. Our experience offers one example of how the cycle of interest convergence, divergence, and reclamation, resets racial hierarchies and stymies justice efforts (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014).

### Interests Converge: The Development of ABC Workshops

Athletic departments are often the most prominent representatives of their institutional hosts (Bernhard, 2016). As such, in 2020, athletic administrators faced immense external pressure from the public as well as pressure from Black athletes to respond proactively to exigent racial inequities. This external pressure established the conditions for interest convergence: *inaction* by athletic departments at this moment would have harmed their status more than partial action toward reforming their policies, practices, and culture. In this context, OU's athletic administrators and staff recognized and acknowledged they were undereducated on race and racism and therefore unprepared to enter, much less *host*, racial dialogues. Still, they were newly inspired to work toward racial justice and recommitted to supporting Athletes of Color. A formalized partnership between OU athletics and JRCoE emerged from this acute and time-sensitive need for a foundational racial justice education program for athletics practitioners, yet it was also the culmination of years of less formal partnership(s) and trust-building. The series, titled the *Anti-Racist Book Club* (ABC), was a response to 2020's national racial justice movements. We designed our intervention to identify and disrupt manifestations internal to college athletics. (Please see "Interventions in Support of Anti-racist Praxis in Athletics" in this special issue for a longer discussion of the naming and branding tension in ABC.)

The calls for ongoing anti-racist programming coincided with the NCAA's suspension of all athletic practice and competition. With existing practice schedules and routines upended, coaches were more willing – since there was little sacrifice on their part – to use designated athletic training times for racial justice conversations. Additionally, Black athlete activists were drawing attention to the racially exploitative labor systems of college sports, with Pacific-12 conference (Pac-12) players issuing a set of demands before they would return to play (Associated Press, 2020). These actions might have persuaded white athletic department officials that (modest) racial justice reform was in their *interest* if they hoped to preserve the collegiate model of athletics.

The first step required listening to Black college athletes and designing any forthcoming programming according to the needs they articulated. To this end, OU and Kansas State University Athletic Departments collaborated on "Humanity Talks," a nation-wide listening session that invited Black college athletes to name and discuss the most pressing racial inequities in college sports. Over 550 college athletes, coaches, staff, and administrators attended the session; Drs. Christensen and Hextrum participated as facilitators. Two major recommendations from the listening session were that white staff and coaches, in particular, (a) need athletic-tailored training on race and racism and (b) should create space for community members to dialogue about race and racism. These objectives are interdependent: staff cannot productively create space for racial dialogue unless they have further training.

After the Humanity Talks, Drs. Christensen and Hextrum created a summer-long workshop series for staff and coaches to discuss race and racism in their units. The programming intended to (re)educate primarily white coaches and staff on how white supremacy manifested in college athletics and to disrupt racism in their workplace (see "Interventions in Support of Anti-racist Praxis in Athletics" in this special issue for a longer discussion of the theoretical and pedagogical approaches undergirding ABC). Initially, Dr. Haslerig was also asked to contribute to the workshop series; she refused in order to oppose the disproportionate emotional and material labor



so often asked of Women of Color. She remained in conversation with the facilitation team. The ABC program – and our research on it – intentionally inverted traditionally problematic racial dynamics in the researcher-subject relationship so that 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. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that Dr. Hextrum’s positionality as a white woman likely lent her credibility, access, and autonomy in creating the ABC program, whereas Dr. Haslerig or other Scholars of Color may not have been trusted by athletic administrators (nor participants) with as much latitude in designing the curriculum.

The collaboration between OU athletics and faculty from JRCoE to provide racial justice programming was even more remarkable given athletic departments’ notorious insularity. Scholars have documented the difficulty of, and population-specific tactics for, obtaining access to do research within college athletic departments (e.g., Benson, 2000; Bimper et al., 2013; Carter-Francique et al., 2013; Hextrum, 2018; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). This partnership, including JRCoE’s control of curriculum development, and the invitation to research the partnership itself (and its products), was unprecedented. As critical scholars who have published research critiquing the norms, practices, and impacts of intercollegiate athletics on equity in various contexts (Haslerig, 2017; Haslerig et al., 2019; 2020; Hextrum, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021), being invited to partner with the athletic department is both rare and indicative of an organizational willingness to be challenged and grow.

### **Early Signs of Divergence**

As soon as ABC began, interest divergence emerged. On May 26, 2020, OU athletics announced that in-person football practice would resume on July 1<sup>st</sup> as teams across the US planned for a Fall season (SoonerSports, 2020). With no vaccine in sight, hospitals at capacity, and deaths climbing, most of US life remained quarantined, yet not football (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2020). Athletes across the country protested the return to play by posting on social media, calling for safer conditions, and opting out of the Fall season (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2020). Despite the resurgence of BLM and COVID-19, little materially changed in college sports in the summer of 2020 (Cooper et al., 2023b). Athletes, especially those in revenue sports, were coerced to return to campus and face-to-face practices. Overall, the “underlying dynamics” of football, “a sport built on the physical sacrifice of unpaid workers,” the majority of whom are Black and rendered expendable, were left “entirely unchanged” (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2021, para. 20).

As we [Dr. Hextrum and colleagues] developed the programming, we recognized that our own roles were contradictory and tension filled. We agreed to provide the programming during the height of the pandemic *only* if we could do so virtually. As knowledge-workers – a group that largely could and did work safely from home during the early days of the pandemic – we had the privilege to conduct ABC virtually (Jones, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2020a; 2020b). Throughout the summer of 2020 we conducted ABC via Zoom, safely isolated in our homes or private offices. Meanwhile, Black football players returned to play to fund the salaries of the athletic department employees we sought to (re)educate. We attempted to engage participants in a conversation about the contradictions of conducting our anti-racist work in relative safety while Black athletes put their lives on the line. We pressed participants to consider the immense sacrifice(s) college athletes were making to fund their salaries. In raising these

conversations, white participants displayed defensive moves, e.g., changing the subject, saying race was not the driving force in a situation, or blaming the victim (DiAngelo, 2011). Such tactics are common when white people are forced to reconcile with their racial advantages (DiAngelo, 2011). For instance, participants said that football players were often “better off” or “safer” when living on campus and competing for universities rather than returning to their home communities and sheltering in place. This defensive move (re)positions racial exploitation as *benevolence* and reinforces racial tropes of downtrodden, impoverished, Black athletes *saved* by sport (Hextrum, 2021). Moreover, rather than acknowledge the racial disparities between who could and could not work safely from their own home – in athletics, the mostly white department staff worked remotely, whereas the mostly Black unpaid front-line athletic laborers in football had to train and compete in person – white athletic staff and coaches in ABC parroted the athletic department’s position that athletes *choose* to play for the love of the game. The language of choice has long been deployed to excuse structural inequality, inure dominant groups to the harms ensured by disenfranchised populations, and maintain status-quo power relations (Leonardo, 2004; 2009; Mills, 2003; Nishi, 2022).

At this same time, the conditions that created the interest convergence – national racial uprisings and Black athletes’ threatening to walkout of their athletic obligations – were eroding. Return to play reset the established racial hierarchies of athletics. During May 2020, athletic departments were uncertain if a football season would occur at all. The combination of public concerns about the pandemic and the promise of racial reckonings that could reset labor relations in athletic departments placed the Fall 2020 season in jeopardy (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2020; 2021). Football players across Power Five Conferences organized Twitter campaigns to request increased safety precautions and racial justice measures (Cooper et al., 2023b). As the summer wore on, athletic departments were successful in their efforts to pressure athletes to return to practice and competition. Several high-profile athletic leaders and coaches participated in public and symbolic efforts to support athletes’ concerns – retweeting BLM statements, wearing anti-racist t-shirts, or marching in racial justice efforts – yet these same officials did not substantively work toward reforming the racially exploitative underpinnings of college athletics (Cooper et al., 2023b). Instead, the combination of symbolic efforts of support (i.e., temporarily hosting racial justice workshops) and coercive efforts (i.e., threatening to revoke scholarships) prevented progressive changes. By Fall 2020, the football season *returned to normal* (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2020; 2021). In turn, athletic leaders safely reclaimed their role as beneficiaries of racial exploitation. Return to play, therefore, initiated *interest divergence*. Athletic departments no longer had an *interest* in supporting racial justice initiatives. While observing the divergence unfold, we continued with our workshop efforts. Individual white members – often low-ranking – were still interested in learning about and participating in racial justice efforts, however limited.

### **Challenges for Sustainability: Dissolution of ABC**

ABC required tremendous intellectual and emotional labor, which was ultimately uncompensated. Un- or under-compensating racial justice work reflects interest divergence – it may be in white organizations’ interest to pursue this work, but only when it costs little (Nishi, 2022). By asking for compensation, our interests diverged. OU Athletics was unwilling to sacrifice *any* of their financial or material power – we requested the equivalent of the adjunct teaching rate (a few thousand dollars for a department whose annual budget exceeds \$100 million) – to design

and lead racial justice programming. After a year of sustained program development, expansion, and delivery, OU athletics offered \$1,500 in research funds to Dr. Hextrum alone. Dr. Grummert (a graduate student at the time) and Dr. Christensen received no compensation. This was after repeatedly assuring Drs. Hextrum and Grummert that they would be compensated for the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 sessions. Only exploitative labor practices were in their interest.

We sought grant funding to create research infrastructure as well as partnership sustainability and capacity-building. These activities included: continuing the workshop series; developing a Praxis Series; creating and implementing training for new practitioner-facilitators; iterating multi-method program evaluation and improvement; and hiring a postdoc to assist with program evaluation. This support was vital to advance our partnership and to realize and institutionalize our racial justice efforts. Our program vision would have created a lasting and sustainable model utilizing reciprocal partnership across OU athletics and JRCoE. By training additional facilitators, we could have built the capacity to hold more and/or larger groups sessions, we could have expanded to additional institutions, *and* we would have ensured that JRCoE's faculty expertise was shared and utilized in generative ways. Unfortunately, not only were we not awarded the grant funding to support the institutionalization of ABC, but OU Athletics withdrew funding to support facilitators after the fact. The undervaluing and disrespect of our time, expertise, and labor fractured our partnership.

As white women facilitators, we recognized the need for us to take on the labor of DEI work so that People of Color were not further traumatized and burdened with it (Quaye et al., 2020). We also recognize our own inadvertent complicity in devaluing DEI initiatives by ultimately doing this work for free (under false pretenses, yet the impact persisted). Due to that understanding, as well as the deep sense of betrayal engendered by the remuneration bait-and-switch, we paused our involvement in ABC in the summer of 2021.

In 2022, OU Athletics approached the facilitators separately to request they restart the program. During one meeting, it became clear that athletics' leadership misunderstood the nature and content of the intervention, given that they belittled the rigor and scope of the program, and ultimately attempted to appropriate ABC – the product of Dr. Hextrum's immense intellectual investment and labor – and reproduce it without the appropriate expertise or quality controls.

We also paused our work due to the national imperialistic reclamation occurring in 2021 against Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly within education. In September 2020 President Trump passed Executive Order 13950 "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping", an effort to curb diversity training throughout the federal government (Federal Registrar, 2020). The executive order prohibited discussions of meritocracy, privilege, biases, and colorblindness and was widely seen as the first anti-CRT legislative effort (Wallace-Wells, 2021). In 2021, over 20 states, including Oklahoma, passed similar legislation at the state level, restricting how educators discuss race, gender, class, and sexuality in education (Hextrum et al., 2022). Oklahoma's HB1775 targeted higher education by preventing any mandatory curriculum, training or orientation with content alleged to include race and sex stereotyping and bias. The bill also prohibited any "sexual counseling" (Hextrum et al., 2022). In the lead up to the bill's passage, OU athletics was conspicuously silent, even as the bill prohibited any mandatory training related to DEI in higher education – training their own department had hosted and solicited for decades. Without clear

guidance or protection from the university about how to engage in racial justice work in this climate, we paused our trainings. Here, *reclamation* is evident. The supposed racial reckoning never achieved its stated aims (i.e., recognizing Black people's humanity) and white elites and policymakers extended their advantage by stripping educators of their modest ability to openly discuss racism in school. The nationwide anti-CRT movement (re)positions white people as victims of a villainous CRT curriculum (Hextrum et al., 2022). As of publication, 229 local, state, and federal agencies have introduced 750 anti-CRT governmental actions (University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA] School of Law, 2023). This vehement conservative reclamation has expanded beyond CRT and is permeating into attacks on any area of American life that is perceived as a threat to those in power or the status quo.

### Conclusion

This case documented the difficulties of creating sustainable, anti-racist work within a white supremacist society. We centered one unique partnership – between critical scholars of sport in a college of education and athletic department practitioners – to illustrate how whiteness can disrupt radical change to institutions. In describing the rise and eventual dissolution of our workshop, we situated our insights within the CRT concepts of interest convergence, divergence, and imperialist reclamation (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Nishi, 2022). Our case arose from and paralleled anti-racist movements occurring at the national level. ABC began during international, months-long protests in support of Black Lives. During the summer of 2020, white interests turned en masse to racial justice work, with spontaneous groups of white people creating CRT book clubs and downloading anti-racist syllabi (Johnson, 2020). White consciousness-raising was on the rise.

College athletics, in large part due to Black athlete resistance and activism, became a prominent site for racial reckonings in the summer of 2020 (Cooper et al., 2023a; 2023b). This organizing provided the opening and momentum needed to introduce anti-racist work to white athletics staff and coaches. We introduced ABC in the Summer of 2020 in an attempt to embed anti-racist programming within OU athletics. We hoped that doing so would eventually reform white supremacist organizational cultures, practices, and policies. In sharing our story of implementing ABC, we documented a cycle in which white powerbrokers and institutional leaders may initially support and endorse anti-racist work (if it seems in their interest to do so) but later co-opt, withdraw, and undermine racial justice programming. We found our aims initially aligned with OU athletics but quickly diverged in how we approached our work, designed and marketed our programming, and imagined our future goals for change.

As the summer wore on, college athletics seemed particularly resilient to anti-racist efforts and Black activism. Athletic departments did not change their operating principles and instead coerced athletes to return to in-person play (Kalman-Lamb et al., 2021). Concurrently, OU athletics withdrew support from ABC, declining to fund our initiative. Without a sustainable funding model, we could not effectively embed our programming in the department. Spring 2022 was our last iteration of the programming as we withdrew our support. But OU athletics indicated they would continue with a version of ABC even though they lacked the expertise and infrastructure to do so. By hosting supposedly anti-racist workshops, OU athletics can present themselves as supporting equity without undoing whiteness in their organization. In this sense, they can cultivate the *perception* of an equity-focused unit while expanding and extending their

racially exploitative athletic model. Cultivating a perception of diversity while expanding inequality is a common tactic observed when white supremacist institutions host uncritical diversity initiatives (Griffin, 2019; Guinier, 2004; Nishi, 2022).

The dissolution of ABC somewhat paralleled the national backlash and imperialistic reclamation sweeping the US. The wave of anti-CRT legislation, e.g., banning curriculum, reading materials, training, and books from public institutions, has enveloped most of the US (UCLA School of Law, 2023). Eradicating the discussion of race from public workshops and classrooms reflects imperialist reclamation as the white elite push legislation to counter-act racial consciousness-raising efforts designed to elevate Black Lives in all sectors of society.

Throughout this article, we have described the unrelenting attempts to preserve white supremacy despite national activism and advocacy. In writing this article, we reflected on our experience at the local level when enacting change on our university campus. As CRT scholars ourselves, we were consciously aware of the interest convergence, divergence, and reclamation cycle at work. Yet we continued our programming for 12 months while the athletic department disengaged, co-opted, and eventually undermined our partnership. We asked ourselves, on more than one occasion, if racial justice programming for white people could ever work. We do not have a neat and clear answer to that question, nor have we attempted to produce one in this article. Yet the outcome of that ambivalence should not be to cease all racial justice efforts. Throughout our year-long programming, white people voluntarily came week after week, eager to learn, hoping to change, and committing to do more for Black Lives. Most of these participants had not previously engaged in racial justice work and, likely, would not have done so without the initial institutional encouragement from the athletic department and the ongoing structure of our workshops. We believe that these small, individual moments of consciousness-raising can and do have an impact on organizations. We will continue to advocate for our vision of transformative intersectional racial justice (see article “Interventions in Support of Anti-racist Praxis in Athletics” in this special issue), one that is not compromised and co-opted by white elites attempting to preserve their authority and power.

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