

Introduction to Special Issue¹

College Sport (In)Equity: Working Within and Beyond the Law to Achieve Intersectional Racial Justice Praxis

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Field Building in Momentous Times

In October 2020, we submitted a proposal to the Spencer Foundation for a field-building grant to gather an interdisciplinary and innovative group of college sport scholars to envision and work toward radical changes in intercollegiate scholarship, practice, and teaching. Fall 2020 was plagued with efforts of higher education to ‘return to normal’ in the face of growing globalized and interrelated threats of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Blackness, and authoritarianism. As no surprise to sports scholars, intercollegiate athletics were central sites and symbols across these interrelated current events. During the brief lockdown of college sports – the shuttering of the Winter and Spring 2020 NCAA championship season – high-profile athletes used their platforms to draw attention to a range of movements. Athlete activism connected the ongoing and unprosecuted police killings of Black people and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Brown communities to the exploitative labor relations embedded in amateurism and revenue sports – where Black athletes are hyper-concentrated.

As high-profile athletes raised public awareness of broader social movements, a fallacy emerged that positioned racial injustices as primarily *external* to sports. Return to play, i.e., bringing back college football and basketball in Fall of 2020, was the salve to heal the racial strife outside of sport. This rhetoric obscured the racial conflicts and inequities internal to athletics. A challenge for all activist movements is how to maintain momentum and public attention long enough to carry forward meaningful reform against entrenched and hegemonic structures (Cooper et al., 2019). Creating sustained, prolonged, and ongoing movements for change requires collaboration across diverse constituency groups, disciplines, and identities (Collins, 2005). It also requires utopian imagining, pushing beyond the imposed cultural, institutional, and legal limits that uphold status-quo power relations (Kelley, 2018). Finally, it requires reflexivity, or learning from and improving upon historical activist efforts (Freire, 1996).

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During the Summer of 2020, we were faculty at the University of Oklahoma, engaged in multiple efforts to reform racial exploitation at our own institution (see “A case of interest divergence” and “Interventions in support of anti-racist praxis in athletics” in this special issue). We had prolonged conversations about how to harness the momentum of this rare cultural moment of public interest into broader social change. We wanted to do so in a way that drew upon past and existing expertise. We discussed ways that we could conceive of and work toward transformation in college sports. We recognized that novel reform would also require transforming how we do scholarship, how we teach, and how we relate to one another within and beyond the academy.

We also wanted to explore connections between racial and gender movements. We were two years from Title IX’s 50th anniversary. Coverage of Title IX’s 40th anniversary brought ill-conceived analyses, histories, and think pieces that: (a) centered women athletes and ignored the impact of Title IX on all of education; (b) divorced Title IX from an intersectional analysis incorporating race, class, sexual orientation and/or other forms of power, and as a result, centered white² women athletes; and (c) presented ‘women’s issues’ as separate from and in conflict with the racial exploitation facing men’s revenue sports (Buzuvis, 2014; Whiteside & Roessner, 2018). In designing the colloquium and this special issue, we have actively sought to counteract those reductionist and ahistorical approaches.

While the Civil Rights Act, including Title IX, prohibits explicit race and gender discrimination in educational and employment settings like college sports, these laws cannot fully address race and gender inequality. For example, women athletes have yet to achieve ‘equal’ status as they remain in sports with less resources, funding, and media attention (Messner, 2002; Milner & Braddock, 2016; Musto, et al., 2017). Furthermore, Title IX disproportionately benefited white women, who are 71.7% of women athletes (Lapchick, 2020). Lastly, United States (U.S.) college sport includes over 520,000 athletes (NCAA Media Center, 2022), yet People of Color are concentrated in only three sports: track & field, basketball, and football (Lapchick, 2020). Reforms through the NCAA legislative processes are similarly constrained. Although the NCAA is a member institution governed by higher education administrators, it is also a separate entity that can operate as a legal body with its own enforced regulations. Moreover, U.S. law has reaffirmed the NCAA’s authority to restrict student athletes (Colombo, 2009).

With these lessons and goals in mind, we proposed a field-building grant that provided the time, space, and community to radically revise future possibilities for college sports as an institution. Our vision was inherently intersectional, interdisciplinary, and interrelated. In changing college sports, we saw the need to change the conditions for college athletes, the media coverage and narratives of college sports, the researchers who study college sports, the practitioners who work within college sports, and those who teach future practitioners and leaders of college sports. Guided by Black feminist activist scholarship (e.g., Collins, 2005; Crenshaw, 1988; 1989) and transformational educational theories (e.g., Freire, 1996; hooks, 2014), we proposed a closed

² Throughout the special issue, all references to the racial group “white” are uncapitalized. While APA style guides encourage authors to capitalize all racial descriptors, critical race theorists, researchers, and activists have moved to capitalizing Black (and other racial categories of color) and uncapitalizing white. Capitalizing both wrongly places Black and white as equally positioned racial groups without acknowledging that the white racial/ethnic group’s claim to identity and culture is predicated on the subordination and domination of racialized minorities. By uncapitalizing white throughout our special issue, we hope to remove some of the implicit legitimacy whiteness cultivates for white identities, white culture, and white supremacy.

colloquium of critical scholars spanning these interest groups and areas of expertise. The articles in this special issue arise from our grant-funded colloquium *College Sport (In)Equity*.

Colloquium Format

The Spencer Foundation funded our field-building grant to host a closed, virtual colloquium throughout 2022 (see Haslerig & Hextrum, 2023 for full description of the colloquium and our attempts to create a revolutionary academic space to present research). In 2021, we invited scholars across diverse disciplines, research agendas, institutions, and identities to submit brief abstracts aligned with the grant objectives. Invited participants exhibited critical praxis – interweaving teaching, scholarship, and activism – throughout their work (Freire, 1996). Only invited presenters and discussants attended the colloquium. This closed format fostered a collaborative, in-progress, and creative event. The event included panel presentations with an assigned discussant. Presenters and discussion facilitators posed questions to inform a larger group discussion. We ended each day with a discussion that crossed panels to brainstorm recommendations emerging from the presented research and that connected to the colloquium aims. The colloquium emphasized dialogic engagement and structured collaboration rather than individualized, recounted research agendas.

During the final session of the colloquium, we discussed whether and how to publish our research findings and dialogue in an academic venue. We decided to create an open-access special issue to help with the publishing demands of academia and to ensure the content could be disseminated beyond academic paywalls.

Peer Review Process

As stated in our vision for the colloquium, we reimagined how to conduct, present, and disseminate public scholarship on college sports (Haslerig & Hextrum, 2023). Throughout the past three years, colloquium participants have received peer feedback from preeminent scholars on their initial proposals, elongated abstracts, presentations, and conference papers. We provided extensive guidance on how discussants (during the colloquium) and reviewers (for this special issue) should engage with scholarship. We encouraged discussants and reviewers to embrace intersectionality and interdisciplinarity in how they conducted reviews. We facilitated this process through an intentional and strategic pairing of reviewers with content. We recognized the broad expertise in our group – all contributors had a robust understanding of (re)production and contestation of power in college sports. But we wanted to push contributors, including ourselves, into uncomfortable and novel terrains with our work. To do so, we: (a) paired discussants and research papers to cross identities and identity-related scholarship in intersectional ways (e.g., pairing a Black man who is an expert in the exploitation of Black men in sport as the discussant for two white women presenting on Title IX); (b) pushed disciplinary boundaries (e.g., pairing a historian as a reviewer for a sociological researcher); and (c) elevated graduate student expertise and embraced bottom-up mentoring (e.g., including graduate students as discussants as well as recipients of feedback).

Through the collaborative format of the colloquium, we observed participants' work grow and expand from this structured feedback. Rather than invite new, external reviewers into the feedback cycle, we conducted an internal, non-anonymized peer review. We believed that doing

so would ensure that reviewers were aware of the deep colloquium discussions and could push papers to engage across themes and live up to these radical aims. We also requested that reviewers assess how much the article contributed to ideas and extended conversations raised at the colloquium. In doing so, we positioned thinking, writing, presenting, conversing, and reviewing as a collaborative process intended to build the field of college sports and push forward innovative scholarship.

As a result of the deep engagement during the colloquium, we were unable to anonymize the review process but still upheld rigorous academic standards. All papers were peer-reviewed by at least two scholars. In addition, our articles were refereed by Jennifer Hoffman to ensure that our reviews were independently collated and received a legitimate editorial review. We are deeply indebted to her for her continued intellectual engagement with this special issue as a reviewer and managing editor. We believe this review process ensured rigor and generative feedback while also adhering to the collectivist and collaborative vision of the colloquium.

In Memory of Dr. Kristina Marie Navarro-Krupka

While we were completing this special issue, we lost an integral athletics and higher education scholar-practitioner, Kristina Marie Navarro-Krupka. The vast network of collaborators, colleagues, and friends who mourn Kristina's death is a testament to the power of the scholarly community she built and an affirmation of the potential for theory-rich, critical, and applied research to impact people and institutions. The imprint of Kristina's scholarship was already apparent in citations across this special issue and journal at large. But with her passing, we want to dedicate this issue to her memory.

Inside the Issue

The articles presented in this special issue arise from the nearly three-year effort described above. Through ongoing and reiterative feedback both in live virtual sessions and written peer review, scholars collaboratively re-envisioned scholarly approaches to college sport equity, focusing on three areas: scholarship, praxis, and media engagement. The 50th anniversary of Title IX, in concert with the current wave of athlete activism, provide an opportunity to explore the limitations of legal approaches and re-envision new pathways for critical sport scholarship, policy, praxis, and activism to advance racial justice over the next 50 years. Questions raised by this special issue include:

- To what historical, ongoing, and contemporary problems and tensions does justice work in athletics need to respond?
- What are the limitations of relying upon or working within legal and NCAA legislative processes for solutions to issues of exclusion and inequity? How do current legislative and policy reforms illuminate these issues?
- How can more intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches advance racial and gender equity in intercollegiate athletics?
- What populations and theories are often underexamined in college sports scholarship? What questions, approaches, theories, and methods should we be engaging as critical sport scholars?

- What shifts to our scholarship, theory, methods, praxis, and media engagement strategies are necessary to move the field forward?
- How do we use research to (re)shape and inform media narratives?
- What is the role of scholars in creating awareness of critical sport scholarship and media (re)framings?
- How can critical scholarship shape our praxis and approach to teaching, training future practitioners, & working with practitioners?

Contributors addressed these questions by exploring a range of topics, settings, and populations associated with college sports. In the **lead article**, *Contemplating a 21st Century View of Title IX's Application to College Sport*, Ellen J. Staurowsky offers an innovative historical and contemporary assessment of Title IX that challenges the reductionist accounts of gender progress. Her approach excavates the way the law continues to harm and marginalize those facing intersectional and systemic forms of oppression. **Next**, Jay Coakley, C. Keith Harrison, and Jean Boyd in their article, *Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) Opportunities for Black College Athletes: Strategically Facilitating Academic Achievement and Successful Career Transitions*, discuss the potential for NIL to support Black college athletes' agency and propose a structure for realizing that potential. The **third article**, *Exploring the Influence of Black Liberatory Theory on Collegiate Sport Reform Initiatives* by Brandon Wallace, contextualizes NIL and larger athletic changes by tracing Black social movements and intra-Black political divergences.

Deepening the volume's exploration of labor exploitation in college sport with the **fourth article**, Sara E. Grummert's piece *Antiblackness and Carcerality: Implications for the Study of College Athletics* rigorously locates intercollegiate athletics within the "carceral continuum" of "antiblack state projects" – an intertwined and mutually informing set of discourses, logics, institutional systems, disciplining practices, and power relations that reproduce and normalize the "abjection of Black people generally" (p. 83). The **fifth contribution** by Siduri Haslerig and Kirsten Hextrum, *Interventions in Support of Anti-Racist Praxis in Athletics*, considers how to resist antiblackness in athletic departments. Using Critical Race Studies, they offer a theory of change that includes formal (i.e., graduate classes) and informal (i.e., workshops and trainings) anti-racist curricula across the university to prepare future practitioners and to provide current athletic department staff with opportunities for life-long learning.

The **sixth article**, by Simran Sethi and Kirsten Hextrum, *An Examination of the Assimilative and Anti-Immigrant Policies, Practices, and Cultures that Harm International College Athletes* introduces to the literature nation/nationalism as a form of global systemic and intersectional oppression undergirding college sports. Rather than embracing the linguistic, cultural, racial, and national diversity ICAs bring to college campuses, they meticulously document the ways the U.S. government, the NCAA, higher education institutions, athletic departments, and coaches impose assimilation of white, Anglo-Saxon American norms onto ICAs. Sethi and Hextrum also offer an alternative model for an integrative, holistic form of support to improve ICA's collegiate athletic experience. The **seventh contribution** revisits questions about reforming the racist conditions plaguing college sports. In *A Case of Interest Divergence: An Athletic Department's Anti-racist Book Club*, Kirsten Hextrum and Siduri Haslerig grapple with designing and implementing anti-racist programming for athletic department coaches, staff, and

administrators during a time of resurgence in state- and national-level racial justice movements and white supremacist violence.

The issue **concludes** with Johanna Mellis, Derek Silva, and Nathan Kalman-Lamb's piece, *"In the Arena": Reflections on Critical Public Engagements on College Sport*. Offering an unflinching autoethnographical view of the backlash they've received as hosts of a critical podcast, "End of Sport," Mellis et al. nonetheless argue that "public engagement should not be principally about self-promotion, but is part and parcel to our research and our moral obligation to the peoples and groups in which we co-construct our scholarship" (p. 186). Indeed, the colloquium served as a forum to work through the consequences so many of us had seen from our critical engagement with sport. As a diverse and intergenerational group of contributors, our experiences have vastly differed in terms of the cultural context, accessibility of large public audiences, our relative vulnerability (which also has varied across any one of our given careers), and the lived impacts of our critical scholarship and choices about public engagement.

Across the special issue, contributors advance research in intersectional ways. They each excavate overlapping forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, capitalism, and nationalism, among other forces that are foundational to the U.S. and to college sports. As part of this project, contributors highlight underserved and understudied populations, e.g., international college athletes, trans* athletes, and Black women, and offer novel insights to foster more inclusive athletic experiences. As activist scholars, many contributors reflected in the dialogue sessions and through their writings on the toll such work has on our scholarship, teaching, and relationships. These reflective pieces substantiate the importance of community building as a critical praxis to sustain us in this work toward creating lasting change.

As organizers of the colloquium and editors of this special issue, we are encouraged by the critical and imaginative research presented here. We had the pleasure of building a community with scholars throughout – and beyond – the grant period. In presenting this special issue, we invite others to carry forward the critical research aims, approach to review, and collaborative methods discussed. As an interdisciplinary team of scholars, we invite contributors and readers to share this content with broad audiences and incorporate these insights throughout their practice, activism, and teaching.

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