



Empirical Article

At the Starting Line: The College Transition Experience of Black Female Student-Athletes

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study examined the college transition experience of Black female student-athletes at a private, Mid-Atlantic, predominantly White, National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I institution. Until recently, Black women who are student-athletes have mainly been subsets of larger studies. By centering their transition experiences, this research investigated their lived experiences. The research aimed to fill a gap in the literature and to identify themes for further study of the college transition. In the spring of 2022, participants (N = 6) completed a brief demographic questionnaire and took part in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews designed to explore the first-year transition to college from a student-athlete perspective. Through descriptive phenomenological analysis, particular attention was given to how student-athletes integrate socially, academically, and athletically in college, with an awareness that the intersectionality of identity for Black women at a predominantly White institution (PWI) might impact that experience of campus integration. Five key themes emerged from the participants' experiences: (a) challenges to connecting, (b) expectations versus experiences, (c) support and positive development, (d) community and belonging, and (e) self-empowerment. The results were reported through a lens of re-evaluating first-year onboarding and support services for Black female student-athletes at a PWI.

Keywords: Black female student-athletes, college transition, student integration, intersectionality, collegiate athletics

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The Challenges of the College Transition for Student-Athletes

The transition to college within the first year presents both challenges and opportunities. In this transition, students adapt to unfamiliar surroundings, make new friend groups (Patton et al., 2016), undertake a more intense academic load in larger classroom settings (Hassel & Ridout, 2018), and begin to look to their futures. Student-athletes making the transition within the first year of college must also adapt to a higher level of competition (Giacobbi et al., 2004), adjusting to more intense demands on time (Streno et al., 2020) and new team and coach relationships (Burns et al., 2012; Orrego Dunleavy & Yang, 2015; Streno et al., 2020). At a time when most college students are exploring their social identities, student-athletes are often constrained to the limitations of their two main identities through athletics and academics (Saxe et al., 2017). For Black female student-athletes at a predominantly White institution (PWI), the transition also poses a challenge to becoming part of the campus

community, as past studies have shown that these young women experience the transition to college differently from their White peers who belong to the majority population (Bernhard, 2014; Carter-Francique, 2014, Carter-Francique et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2016; Foster, 2003; Hesse-Biber et al., 2008). Black female student-athletes must work harder to find a space in which they feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging. Yet, their ability to do so is often hampered by the demands of the sport to which they are obligated, impeding student engagement in campus life, which Tinto (1997) argued is critical to feeling a sense of belonging to the campus community.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported in 2022 that six percent of all student-athletes participating in Division I sports were Black women (28% were White women, and an additional 12% were listed as Other, the only three categories posted in the “Gender & Race/Ethnicity” category; NCAA, 2023). There is a dearth of literature directed specifically at the Black female student-athlete experience, even while the majority of Black female student-athletes attend and compete for PWIs (Bernhart, 2014; Cooper et al., 2016). Black women who are student-athletes have, until recently, mainly been subsets of larger studies or not even mentioned distinctly in studies of female student-athletes (Arvan, 2010; Cooper et al., 2017; Giacobbi et al., 2004; McElveen & Ibele, 2019; Orrego Dunleavy & Yang, 2015; Saxe et al., 2017).

Rather than deducing their experience from the reporting of a broader and largely White population or through the lens of the experiences of Black male student-athletes, this study (undertaken as part of a doctoral dissertation) centered on the transition experiences of Black female student-athletes. The purpose was to learn about their lived experiences through interviews reflecting on the first college year. Participants discussed the challenges and expectations they had in their first year, the support systems that they used as they adjusted to college life, and how they viewed community and self-empowerment in prioritizing their own needs.

Theoretical Frameworks

The current phenomenological study utilized two key theoretical frameworks to explore college transition: Tinto’s (1975; 1997) *student integration model* (SIM), which examined the college transition experience, and Crenshaw’s (1989) *theory of intersectionality*, which explored race and gender. The latter theory was used to refine and extend the former beyond the two domains of academics and social life by considering “the multiple grounds of identity” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245).

Seeking to discern the reasons for students who discontinue their college work, i.e., labeled “dropouts,” Tinto (1975) decided to study the interactions between the individual and the institution. He considered the transition experience to include students’ feelings and perceptions related to new activities, performance, and interaction in college life, which could be in either academic or social areas. Indeed, Tinto (1975) allowed for scenarios in which a student could successfully integrate into college life in one area (social or academic) but not the other. Tinto’s (1975) emphasis on students’ pre-college expectations, as well as the value of students’ own perception of their academic integration and intellectual development (McCubbin, 2003), frames the current study. Thus, the current investigation focuses on student-athletes’ expectations of college prior to the first year and their perception of their college integration in several areas, including social and academic. In a later study of the impact of the college classroom experience

on persistence, Tinto (1997) showed that learning communities have a positive effect on student persistence by building networks of peer support and forming early friendships. This result also frames the current study, which sought to understand to which communities student-athletes may have felt most connected as they became members of the college. For example, this study hypothesized if college student-athletes might feel a stronger sense of connection to a subset of their team (e.g., sprinters among the entire track team) or to some other area of interest or identity outside of sport (e.g., Black Student Union or Future Engineers).

Although Tinto's social integration model highly influenced college retention work, it has been criticized for several reasons. The SIM is limited in application to the experiences of traditional students, i.e., residential students at 4-year institutions who attend college full-time directly after high school; it is inadequate to model student attrition; and it is a negative approach (derived from Durkheim's theory of suicide) to understanding failed integration into college life. Others challenge his use of academic integration as not being an important predictor of student attrition (McCubbin, 2003). The current study sought to address the limitations of Tinto's theory and to build on his discernment that institutions of higher education are comprised of both academic and social systems (extended in this study to include athletics). The current study attuned such an approach to the individual level by using intersectionality (specific to the Black female experience and more broadly regarding other aspects of identity) as a frame for exploring how first-year Black student-athletes experience the transition to college and integration into campus life.

Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) concept of intersectionality showed the complexity of multiple facets of identity at work within one individual. It was originally constructed to examine the power dynamics that oppressed or silenced aspects of Black women's identities. Crenshaw (1991) organized her approach into three areas: (a) structural, since the experience of race and gender for Women of Color is distinct from that of White women; (b) political, since the binary of antiracist and feminist politics marginalized those at the intersection of the two; and (c) representational, since there are cultural constructs of identity. Crenshaw's (1989) groundbreaking theory challenged the "single-axis framework" (p. 140) that defined Black women by either race or sex, which emphasizes the experiences of those more privileged in either category but fails to value the holistic experience of Black women. In this dialectic, Black women are marginalized and devalued (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's (1991) use of the intersection metaphor conceptualized the way in which legal systems, feminists, and racial liberation groups forced the identity of Black women into an either/or situation, splitting their political efforts and dividing their focus between two different areas of race and sex.

As with other studies specific to the experiences of Black female student-athletes, the current study considered key aspects of intersecting identities within a setting that made race more salient, that of a PWI. In addition to Crenshaw's emphasis on race and sex, the current study considered whether the identities of "student" and "athlete" were in tension with one another and whether the development of either or both roles at the college level created any tension with being female and Black. Mindful that intersectionality theory has since come to be a catchall phrase for broader conceptions of identity, appropriated by the majority in ways ironic to its intent (Carastathis et al., 2016), the current research study focused on the student-athletes' core identities as Black women. More importantly, perhaps, it aimed to provide the space for participants to tell

their own stories outside of an either/or paradigm. Crenshaw (1991) argued that intervention strategies to protect Women of Color would not fully address their needs if designed by those who come from different racial or class backgrounds. This can be applied more broadly to programming in higher education that is developed to support young Women of Color undergoing the stresses of the transition to college. In other words, the efficacy of the programming and support will be limited if designed without the voice and perspective of those for whom they are intended.

Synthesizing both theoretical viewpoints of Tinto and Crenshaw, the current research study considered whether the intersecting aspects of identity affect Black female student-athletes' integrations into college life, possibly requiring multiple integration experiences for any one student-athlete. For holistic development, student-athletes need to have the time, opportunity, and interest to take part in campus activities outside of academics and athletics and to find new communities of connection and support. Crenshaw's theory, combined with Tinto's, examines the interplay of identity within an institutional setting that may impact the transition experience across those multiple facets of identity. The current phenomenological study had two guiding research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the first-year transition to higher education for Black female student-athletes?

RQ2: How does a Black female student-athlete experience the transition to college academically, athletically, and socially?

Literature Review

A review of research that specifically considered Black female student-athletes and their transition experiences shows the influence of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989, 1991). Intersectionality expands the discussion of identity for Black female student-athletes beyond the two main identities examined in most research on college student-athletes: *student*, i.e., the academic side, or *athlete*. As Carter-Francique (2014) defined developmental intersections in her overview of the social development of Black female student-athletes, she distinguished three aspects of identity: "Black female, college athlete, and Black student" (p. 42). Implicit in these aspects of identity are areas of experience through which students undergo their transition to college life.

Researchers have considered the intersectionality of identity in studying the embodied self of Black female student-athletes, impediments to holistic self-development, and organizational fragmentation of self (Bernhard, 2014; Foster, 2003; Hesse-Biber et al., 2008). In some of the earliest directed studies of Black women in sport, Smith (1992) contextualized the intersections of gender, race, and socioeconomic class. Intersections of identity have comprised the totality of a Black woman's sense of self, making her vulnerable to oppression through both race and gender. Context matters as these oppressions are furthered within a sport culture that is largely White and male (Bruening et al., 2005) and at a PWI (Hesse-Biber et al., 2008). Furthermore, the organizational structure and architecture of an athletics program may isolate student-athletes from the rest of the student population (Foster, 2003). In one study, Black female student-athletes defined their power in three ways that relate to the intersectionality of identities – Black women,

religious, and sexual – showing how power transcends the college experience and calls student-athletes to situate themselves within a larger social matrix (Carter-Francique et al., 2017).

Crenshaw's (1991) stress on the presence of Black women's voices in developing programming aimed at them aligns with the research available on the experiences of Black female student-athletes, which addresses *silence* and the *lack* of study of this subpopulation. Some of the earliest directed studies highlight the *absence* of Women of Color in mainstream sport, coaching, and staffing (Abney, 1999; Abney & Richey, 1992; Smith, 1992), while others report the silencing of Black female student-athletes by authority figures and even other student-athletes at PWIs (Bruening et al., 2005; Foster, 2003). Simien et al. (2019) adapted Hawkesworth's (2003) term *racing-gendering* for the treatment of Black female student-athletes in the extant literature, which they state either "rendered...[their] experiences invisible or obscured the complexity of their multiple group identity" (p. 410). Theune (2016) and Carter-Francique (2014) commented on the *invisibility* of Black female student-athletes, as applied to being both Black and female, while Carter-Francique et al. (2017) and Cooper et al. (2016) used the term *marginalized*. However, Carter-Francique (2014) also pointed to the inverse challenge of being a Black female student-athlete who plays a marquee sport, noting that the visibility associated with such a sport can also cause anxiety and pressure on students.

Despite Crenshaw's (1991) emphasis that researchers should listen to the voices of Black women, research on the college transition year shows factors that adversely affect Black students, athletes, and non-athletes alike, which hinders their willingness to speak up. Due to cultural dissonance, stressors that Black students at PWIs might experience in their transition include imposterism, isolation, stereotype threat, alienation, and discrimination (Helling & Chandler, 2021; Kennedy & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). Black students are also more likely than White students to be first-generation college goers – and Black women at the highest rate of all – who lack foreknowledge of the college experience (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Black students are more likely than their White counterparts to report the helpfulness of high school guidance counselors and a greater frequency of consulting them (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Yet, college students of color are less willing than White students to seek mental health support (Helling & Chandler, 2021).

With an understanding of the effects of racial difference at a PWI, many studies specific to Black student-athletes (male and female) have emphasized racial identity over that of student or athlete. Harrison Jr. et al. (2002) examined the connections between racial and athletic identities via the revised Cross Model of Nigrescence (1995), exploring how understanding Black identity shapes athletic identity as well. Several qualitative studies use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame both how student-athletes of color define themselves and how they are defined by others (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux, 2018; Harrison et al., 2020). Stereotype threat in the classroom increases for Black student-athletes when their status as athletes is linked to their scholar identities (Harrison & Rasmussen, 2015; Stone et al., 2012). Fuller et al. (2016) found a positive correlation between high self-opinion of racial group and academic self-concept among Black male student-athletes, while micro-aggressions experienced by Black student-athletes adversely affected their sense of academic belonging and student integration (Comeaux, 2010). In their research on preparing for the transition out of college, Harrison and Lawrence (2004) found that Black student-athletes recognized the importance of having a positive role model.

Relatedly, studies show support for or negative emphasis on racial identity at the systemic level impacts the student experience. In an early consideration of larger systems, Sloan Green (1981) stressed the importance of recognizing economic disparities that contribute to the ability or inability of Black women to train to become elite-level athletes. Comeaux (2018) focused on the systemic hyper-surveillance of Black male student-athletes. Still, his broader assertion that any negativity at the campus climate level impedes meaningful student engagement can be applied to a study of the experience of Black female student-athletes. The campus culture of a PWI has impacted the self-perception and sense of belonging of Black female student-athletes who may experience feelings of isolation due to a lack of diversity, a paucity of coaches and staff of color – particularly Black women (Abney, 1999; Abney & Richey, 1992; Bernhard, 2014), or experience racism and discrimination (Cooper & Newton, 2021). Black female student-athletes who feel social pressure at a PWI have wanted support for their identities beyond athletics, which were often overlooked (Bernhard, 2014).

Conversely, the cultural familiarity and support of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) provides a better frame for student integration for Black student-athletes than a PWI, thus emphasizing the importance of the organizational culture and community cultural wealth (CCW) into which the students integrate (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Beyond the boundaries of campus, the ability of Black women to maintain familial ties factored into college decisions. It provided a support system once enrolled, which influenced persistence to the sophomore year (Kennedy & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). Research has shown an emphasis in Black student development on family support, informal peer support, safe spaces, and resilience training designed to fit the needs of Black students (Carter-Francique, 2014; Cooper et al., 2017; Helling & Chandler, 2021; Kennedy & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). Female-centered mentoring and safe space programs can offset the effects of negative organizational structure that limits the student experience for Black female student-athletes and benefits student development and self-articulation of success (Carter-Francique, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2017; Elfman, 2020).

The current study was influenced by research on Black female student-athletes and their perceptions of campus cultures of belonging, which is critical for successful student integration within multiple aspects that correlate to identity: academic, athletic, and social, i.e., familial and cultural (Cooper et al., 2017; Cooper & Newton, 2021). Holistic development is key for Black female student-athletes for self-acceptance, especially at a PWI, for “[seeing] the categories of race, class and gender as ‘contingencies’ of one’s self concept is an important way to conceptualize their impact on individual’s lives” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2008, p. 23). In some of the earliest studies of Black women and sport, Sloan Green (1981) advocated that coaches and advisors at both high school and college levels provide structure, expectations, and “demand excellence” from Black female student-athletes (p. 76). While organizational support for student development can yield higher graduation rates, it can also lead to too much oversight, e.g., late-night check-ins and mandatory study halls, at the cost of student-athlete autonomy, especially when premised on false ideas of “racially based deficiencies” of academic underdevelopment and hyperactive sexuality (Foster, 2003, p. 304) that negatively frame external identity.

While the adverse effects of being *othered* at PWIs are noted above, the current study was shaped by Cooper et al.’s (2016) use of an anti-deficit perspective to discuss positive transitional experiences. In it, five Division I Black female student-athletes at a PWI examined factors that

impact a successful transition (*adjustment*) to college. The study considered “pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success” (p. 112), demarcating the stages of college integration along the lines of six stages defined by Tinto (1975, 1997). Several external factors, including academic-achievement-minded families, have led to student success (Cooper et al., 2016; Ofoegbu et al., 2021). Overall support in the college transition and first-year success comes from mentors and family, mothers in particular (Cooper et al., 2017; Zhang & Smith, 2011); the role of mentoring, mothers, and female-centered support emerged in studies specific to the Black female student-athlete experience, too (Carter & Hart, 2010; Carter-Francique, 2014; Cooper et al., 2016; Elfman, 2020).

Methods

Site Selection

The selected study site was an NCAA Division I Mid-Atlantic PWI that is private and religiously affiliated. The overall undergraduate student population at this institution is under 7,000, compared to the median student population of 8,960 at the 350 Division I schools (NCAA, 2021). The NCAA states that Division I student-athletes graduate at a higher rate than the general undergraduate student population (NCAA, 2021). Thus, this research sought an institutional setting that emphasized high academic achievement so that any strain on the identity of *student*, in addition to that of *athlete*, might be considered in the first year of college. The institution of study (anonymized as Studia University) has R2 Doctoral status in the Carnegie classification system of high research activity and had an admission rate of 25.2% in the Fall of 2021. Sixty-six percent of the incoming class scored between 1400-1600 on the SAT, and 70% of the first-year students graduated in the top 10% of their high school class (Common Data Set 2021-2022).

Participants

After receiving IRB approval from the institution, I recruited participants in the spring semester of 2022 via flyers hung in the athletics buildings, directed email (addresses were obtained via the athletics department) sent twice (the second at the end of March), and the snowball method. Inclusion criteria involved self-identification as a varsity athlete, female, and Black. I chose the varsity level for commitment, competition, associated pressures, and public awareness it entails.

The number of available Black female student-athletes who played a varsity sport at this institution limited the sample size, as they were a minoritized sub-population of undergraduates. In the fall of 2019 and 2020, Black or African-American students (both male and female) accounted for five percent of the institution’s overall undergraduate population, or an average of 342 students, male and female, at all undergraduate levels (IPEDS, 2021; Student enrollment profile, 2021). The number of Black female student-athletes was thus lower than that total, and those in the first year lower still, possibly as low as seven (the number was not reported in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], information recorded by the institution). By including all undergraduate Black female student-athletes, I increased the chances of meeting my minimum number of participants, which was five. In advertising the study, I used the identity “Black” instead of “African-American,” which was significant in the inclusion of three international student-athletes, who considered themselves Black but not African-American.

Six student-athletes consented to participate and completed a brief demographic questionnaire. All had competed in their sport by the time of their interview, and all had experienced the transition to the first year of college by the spring semester. Thus, the interviews were reflective in nature, looking back to the transition experience. Of those enrolled, two student-athletes were sophomores, two were juniors, one was a senior, and one called herself a junior-senior since she was a transfer student. No first-year students chose to enroll in the study. The participants were further along in their studies and their engagement in sports, which allowed them to consider their journey and judge their successes; however, as the student-athletes were better established in their roles, their responses were perhaps influenced by greater maturity and confidence in their development. As not all Division I student-athletes receive scholarships, I included both scholarship and non-scholarship students in the sample (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1*Selected Demographics*

Pseudonym	College	Year	GPA	First Gen	Sport: team or individual	Years in sport	Scholar-ship?	HS Demographic
Gabby	Engineering	Jr./Sr. (transfer)	3.68	Yes	Individual	12 years	Yes, full athletic	Predominantly Black
Laila	A&S (Science)	Jr.	3.96	No	Individual	7 years	No	Racially mixed
Simone	A&S (Arts)	Sr.	2.89	No	Individual	13 years	Yes, full athletic	Predominantly White
Serena	A&S (Arts)	Soph.	3.84	Yes	Individual	6 years	Yes, full athletic	Predominantly Black
Naomi	A&S (Arts)	Jr.	3.3	No	Team	6 years	No	Racially mixed
Althea	A&S (Arts)	Soph. (transfer)	3.7	No	Team	8 years	No	Predominantly Black (slightly)

The pre-interview demographic questionnaire showed that three participants came from other countries; of the remaining three, one came from a town within two hours of campus, one from the Midwest, and one from the South. Three varsity sports were represented, including two team-based sports and one sport where athletes compete more on the individual level (but their personal results also contributed to a team result). Additionally, three student-athletes held athletic scholarships.

Data Collection

The 12-item demographic questionnaire was adapted from both Bruening et al.'s (2005) and Cooper and Newton's (2021) studies, both of which explored the experiences of Black female collegiate student-athletes. The demographic questions were generated using American College Personnel Association recommendations to provide background for the interviews and avoid binary questions. Once consent was obtained, I scheduled individual semi-structured interviews

with each participant. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour in length and were guided by semi-open-ended questions on an interview protocol. All participants were given the choice of meeting face-to-face or through Zoom, and each opted for Zoom.

Participants and the name of the school were assigned aliases by removing hometown identifiers and broadening their sport identity. For example, instead of a *sprinter*, they were labeled as *a member of an individual sport*, or instead of a *soccer player*, *a member of a team sport*. Aliases were accorded to each participant from a list of professional Black, female athletes, proceeding through the list according to the order of interviews with no intentional connection between the professional athlete's identity and that of the student-athlete. Furthermore, I respected the research site and protected its identity by using a pseudonym for the school (Studia University) or otherwise obscuring its identity in the study.

Interview Guide

Through Tinto's (1975) lens, the opening questions on the interview protocol explored participants' pre-college life via their early experiences within their sport and their expectations for college. These open-ended questions, some of which were adapted from a previous study on college engagement (Cooney, personal correspondence, October 7, 2021), connected to the overarching research questions of this project. For example, Question 1 on the transition to college asked: Looking back on the year so far, can you describe what went really well (as a student, an athlete, a friend)? Question 2 considered the earlier part of the transition by asking: Tell me about the journey that led you to this college.

In describing their transition to college, the participants were asked to consider what challenges they faced, what opportunities arose, what support they used, and what expectations they had of what their experiences would be. Part of discussing that transition involved talking through their journey to college and their sports careers. In addition, the participants discussed their idea of community and how it related to their actual experience on campus. They were asked to discuss the most important part of their college life, as well as who or what they relied on the most.

Data Analysis

Following procedures laid out in Creswell and Poth (2018), I used qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, read through the edited transcripts to discern any patterns, pauses, or vocal emphases that held significance, and created a list of preliminary codes. I created a codebook of the major codes found in these transcripts and synthesized the results by centering on the main codes. I collapsed the codes into broad themes and formed clusters of meaning to ensure the consistency of coding inherent to my reading.

Participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy and authenticity, allowing them to provide alternative phrasing as needed as a form of member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, as not all evidence fit into the patterns, I also allowed for negative evidence or experiences that seemed to refute the pattern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the theoretical emphasis on giving voice to Black female student-athletes, this activity was

especially meaningful in allowing them to ensure their stories were accurately represented. In reporting the research, I aimed to use the interview details to create a sense of personality and to write rich descriptions of the student-athlete experiences and recollections (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After coding the interview responses, I interwove the participants' words into a narrative as much as possible using descriptive phenomenological analysis.

Positionality Statement

The position of the researcher needs careful consideration. Throughout data interpretation, I had to consider how personal experiences and perceptions might have affected reading and coding the material. Bracketing personal experience was difficult but necessary. In generating themes and writing the narrative, as someone who is neither Black nor a student-athlete, who had an undergraduate experience as a member of the majority identity on campus and with parents who were college graduates, I had to engage in reflexivity to check bias from personal position and identity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another point of reflexivity was bridging the gap technology has created in the past few decades; that technology has significantly impacted how college students interact socially is an understatement. This *checking* of personal experience became easier after the first two interviews, which helped to provide a frame of experience for a contemporary student.

Results

The focus of the research questions allowed the participants to reflect on their college transition experience more broadly (the individual voice advocated by Crenshaw) and also within three key areas of transition experience: athletics, academics, and social life (the structural focus of Tinto). Once the coding was completed, five key themes emerged from the participants' experiences, showing the importance of the social transition: (a) challenges to connecting; (b) expectations versus experiences; (c) support and positive development; (d) community and belonging; and (e) self-empowerment.

Responses showed the struggles and gains of transition across three areas of experience/identity: academic, athletic, and social. Although participants touched on all three areas, they focused predominantly on their social transition, both in how they minimized expectation/concern for academic performance and on team and coaching relationships in athletics. They also highlighted an early sense of salience of racial identity, othering among new White peers, and a reliance on established support systems in the transition year.

Five Themes

Challenges to Connecting

Participants discussed the challenges of athletic transition, including the perceptions other students (i.e., non-athletes) had of their privilege, e.g., early class registration times, gear, and swag; not feeling supported by fans at competitions in the same way that the male athletes were; and difficulties that emerged with team dynamics and relationships with coaches. Among these challenges, student-athletes highlighted the limitations of athletic participation. This included the

time demands, which also confined them to the realms of academics and athletics. These time constraints were self-reported by student-athletes who participated on a team and as an individual; only one participant (a member of a team sport) did not highlight time as a constraint. Participants' comments show how they were aware of wanting a fuller collegiate experience but felt constrained by the demands of athletics, particularly in terms of finding other social opportunities. Of fitting in on campus, Gabby said,

And then people always recommend to join clubs, but it's hard to join clubs outside of [sports]. Which, I did join clubs but, a lot of times, I couldn't go to the student body meetings because of class or training. So that was pretty hard trying to find the balance with that.

Instead, she bonded with her teammates, both because of proximity and cultural affiliation. A junior who had since made opportunities for herself in a club, Simone reflected on the constraints of her athletic commitment, saying, "I think I was in strictly sports and class that first year." Serena succinctly stated that participating in a varsity sport "causes you to miss life."

Most of the reflections on the transition year, both specific to athletics and extra-athletic, were social in nature. Student-athletes who were engaged as members of a team, who felt close to their teammates, and who were mentored by older teammates were more resilient in making the transition. This experience did not seem to vary from team-based sports to individual competition. Laila said that the upper-level athletes helped her transition in her first year, saying of the team, "We all try to do as much as we can together to try to build our community and try to build the team as individuals." Simone, who felt alienated in her first semester, felt better once she was training and competing with her teammates in the spring. Because she had already been competing at a national level, Simone felt prepared for college-level training and competition, asserting, "So competitively coming in sports-wise, that was the one place where I felt like I thrived." Of all the participants, she was the only one to include her college coach as a positive source of support.

In contrast, Naomi said she had not expected the team culture to be "political" or hierarchical. In this hierarchy, her coach "prioritized" or favored certain athletes depending on ability and performance. Student-athletes who expected close relationships with their teammates and did not find them faltered, largely because of racial and cultural differences. Naomi said she had first attempted to feel community by socializing with her White teammates." She admitted: "I really struggled to go out with my team because [pause] they were just going places that I didn't really, one, enjoy, and two, even feel that safe in." She added that when she didn't go to events, she was made to feel that she had missed a bonding experience. With a laugh, Serena thought about what community meant within her athletic life and admitted, "I can say that for me specifically, with my team, I feel there's no sense of community."

In high school, participants found friendship and support with their teammates. In a new environment away from former friend groups, those student-athletes without a team bond struggled to feel accepted and at ease on campus. For Naomi, being the only Black student-athlete on her team was a different experience from her past high school team:

There was always another person that looked like me, or...could relate to my experience as a Black woman in some way, whether it was a team with other Women of Color or something like that. There was just always somebody that I felt understood me a little bit deeper.

Her initial social connection with the university team was too shallow to serve as a true support system and foundation when she felt the dissonance of minoritized racial identity at a PWI.

Affecting the transition across all aspects, racial identity and *othering* emerged as challenges early on in the discussion, as Naomi noted. While participants knew on one level what a PWI was, on another level, they were not prepared practically for what it would feel like to live on a PWI campus; five out of the six participants reported sharing this experience. It did not seem to matter if participants had attended a predominantly Black, predominantly White, or racially mixed high school; accounts of feeling othered crossed these divisions. Most felt aware of their racial or cultural identity once at a PWI and that their identity did not fit in with this setting. As Simone said, “This school was not made for me to fit in.” Feeling alone on her team amplified the larger experience of being a Black woman at a PWI; only two of her teammates were Black women, although Simone was careful to qualify that one was “mixed.” Like Naomi, Simone felt no one else could understand her experience or connect with her. She said,

A lot of people didn't really understand what I was going through and didn't understand being in a White space was...suffocating. At the time I didn't understand that because I didn't know what I was feeling. I just knew that I didn't like it. I felt isolated, and I didn't know what to do with it.

Her use of the word “suffocating” is noteworthy, for it suggests a failure to survive, let alone to thrive.

For several students, this feeling of being othered related to a cultural division, i.e., Caribbean or African, that sometimes doubled with race and, other times, divided them from Black American students. For example, international student Gabby reported feeling a cultural disconnect from her peers who were not from her country. Not only did she have to learn to navigate different ways of socializing, but to “survive,” she said:

I have to talk different, even though I speak...good English. I have to make sure that I say it – not tailor my accent, but I kind of do have to, so I don't have to be repeating myself all the time.

Gabby's account of how she adapted her manner of speech to that of the majority is an example of *code-switching*, the phenomenon of moving between racialized language varieties largely applied to African American Language versus Standardized English (Holliday & Squires, 2021). It also broadly applies to combinations of two or more linguistic varieties in bilingual communities, often within the same conversation or sentence (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). Gabby's experience showed that the multiple facets of her identity pulled her in different directions. Having to adjust her speech when among American students, Gabby bonded more readily with other student-athletes of her culture and linguistic variety, thus establishing a friend group and support system.

Expectations Versus Experiences

Participants mentioned that they felt comfortable transitioning to college-level academic work because their high school *experience* had prepared them for it and because they *expected* to work hard academically. One even said she had thought the work would be harder than it was; she felt some of her assignments were “busy work.” Several participants were proud of themselves for how well they did in class or for being admitted to a school with a strong academic reputation.

Those participants who were not first-generation college students had a clearer concept of what to expect from college life and could think beyond the general idea of athletics as a means to a degree. For example, Laila’s expectations were not directed at academics, future careers, or athletic stardom. Rather, she focused on personal happiness. For Laila, success meant making the most of her time at college, which she connected to having fun. Her expectation of making new friends, on her team and off, aligned with her later experience. In contrast, as a first-generation college student, Gabby’s initial expectation in applying to college was that her sport would be the means to pay for her education, which would lead to a career in the medical field. While she adapted her career goal after her first college year, she stayed focused on a STEM path and concentrated on athletics as a means to attain an education, not as an end to itself. Serena also expected that her sport would provide a scholarship for her education, and she also had a career plan. In contrast, Simone decided on a college solely based on her athletic career and said she had no expectations of college life.

Certain reported transition experiences pertained more to the expectations of the general social life of the college. For example, it became obvious that the initial residence hall assignment was crucial. Student-athletes who were housed across campus from their first-year peers suffered socially, as the distance meant they were not as likely to travel across campus to partake in any planned social events held in the freshman residence halls. Moreover, they were not present for the day-to-day bonding experiences of living with other students in the first-year transition. Living across campus from other first-year students, Serena felt isolated from other student-athletes and other Black women. Serena recalled occasionally seeing a Black male student-athlete who “lived downstairs” and said she “gravitated towards him” because he was from her country. As an international student, Serena said her expectations for college were shaped by media, largely the American movie industry. She explained,

I was hoping it would be like the movies, you know, where you make some friends, and you have like, one group of friends (gestures to show a set), where you hang out with them, do fun things with and everything. Yeah, but I hoped for that, but I saw myself being a loner, because I didn't know how to socialize with people.

For Serena, movies made college seem like an easy place to make friends and fit in, but in reality, she “experienced a lot of culture shock...because I was going to a PWI.”

Support and Positive Development

Findings show that participants relied on established *positive support systems* from home and high school. While they did create new networks of friends once at college, they usually

maintained a trusted circle from their life before college. Foremost was the influence of parents, especially their mothers, to whom they turned for emotional support and advice. High school coaches, who had been advocates during their high school sports careers and (for American students) often assisted in the college recruitment process, were still trusted resources. The importance of maintaining connections to home, family, and friends became clear throughout each discussion. With the ease of technology today, e.g., texting, long-distance calls, FaceTime, etc., the participants seemed well-connected to off-campus support.

As might be expected of first-year students, those participants who could not participate in outside activities did not expand their friend groups and lagged in making the transition reported feeling isolated and alienated. Serena, who had relied on her friends in high school but struggled to make new friends in college, said her support system in the first year consisted of (in this order) her mother, her high school friends, and campus pet therapy sessions (she had a favorite dog). Naomi said she did not receive the support she wanted from her coach and sought it elsewhere within the Athletics Department. A Black male graduate assistant was her first source of support, allowing her the opportunity to speak about feeling like she didn't fit in on campus. Within that first year, she received support from her new friends in the Black student-athlete club, a source of personal strength and confidence.

Parents, especially mothers, were noted as support systems for each participant. Laila's story showed that coming to campus with expectations of a well-rounded college experience and parental guidance led to a smoother transition. Laila's parents, both Ivy League educated and former student-athletes, had advised her:

They kind of just told me to just be myself, to go into this, not having any expectations, but just be myself, because that's the only way you'll be able to meet the people that are supposed to be in your life....

Her parents' advice and their own experiences as college student-athletes helped prepare her for her own journey. In particular, her mother recognized Laila's tendency to stress and emphasized this social support expectation.

As most participants reported a strong connection to family as one of their supports, being away from home most likely negatively impacted the experience of belonging. Cooper et al. (2017) noted the strong influence of familial capital on Black female student-athletes' support as an aspect of community cultural wealth (CCW), especially within a White context. Along similar lines of familial support, connecting to new groups that positively reinforced, accepted, and celebrated their racial and/or cultural identities seemed to improve participants' feeling of belonging, although not necessarily to the institution.

Community and Belonging

Related to support systems was the importance of developing a sense of *community*. Focusing on integrating into the college, participants explained what community looked like, how they saw it on campus, and where they felt they were part of a community. The explanation of community varied among the six participants and included the following: "Community is how

people are around you and that people support each other, even people that you don't know" and "Community is where people are there for each other unconditionally and want to see each other succeed." The six participants viewed campus community similarly: being "around" each other or present for each other; support and desire to help each other succeed; and, as expressed by at least four participants, acceptance of difference ("even people you don't know," "unconditionally," "multiple different people," "all different"). Their definitions reflected their experiences of or desire for community on campus, whether through academics, athletics, or other social groups.

Tinto (1975, 1997) posited that engaging with peers inside and outside of the classroom is affiliated with greater academic success, and this seemed to be so for those student-athletes who could find the time and make the effort. Gabby served as an orientation counselor; Laila went on a retreat and was friends with students in sororities; and Althea belonged to several cultural and identity-based clubs. All three reported high GPAs (as shown in Table 1). These activities also provided a means of feeling community when their teams did not do so.

Overall, the study revealed a distinction of community/belonging between the ideal each student-athlete held and the reality of her experience. Even so, the ideals showed some common motifs of acceptance and support, which are necessary factors in making a smooth transition within the first year of college. When participants did not feel a part of a community, though, their survival in college often depended on their ability to take care of themselves and to build the community they desired.

Self-empowerment

Another overarching theme that emerged was the significance of *self-empowerment*. This is defined by the moments in which participants showed awareness of their priorities in college, their development or change over time, their plans for the future, and the importance of their own mental health. I also noticed when participants affirmed their choices or actions as positive or self-supporting.

When Serena spoke of how hard she was working, the full extent of her daily activity became clear, even with a course reduction: "I'm taking four courses, but because I have my internship, and I'm training and competing, and I have physiotherapy because of my injury, and I also just got a job on campus to be working night shift." As she detailed the extent of her involvement and the care with which she had structured her schedule, Serena's positive affirmation of her decisions was apparent.

Both Simone and Laila identified personal growth as their top college priority. As seniors and juniors, respectively, both participants had the maturity to look back on their time in college to appreciate how much they had grown from their first year when they struggled to fit in. Both also addressed the importance of mental health advocacy in this discussion. Simone said,

I wouldn't sit here and say that [my sport] or academics take more precedence. I think it's more so the overall growth that I have developed while being here. Because I think that the biggest thing I've probably learned here is to take care of my mental health.

None of the participants chose sports as the most important part of their college life, suggesting that they had a multidimensional self-perception. Athletics was viewed as a means to achieve other aspects of who they were, whether it was their desire to earn a college degree in a particular field or to make close friendships. For the two who stressed personal growth, athletics was not necessarily a factor, except that both belonged to the group of Black student-athletes and even served as members of its board, hoping to help other student-athletes achieve a greater sense of balance and community.

Dissatisfied with her team experience, Althea said, “I think I’ve spent a lot of time waiting for someone or something to change.” She decided to take matters into her own hands instead. Althea had joined other clubs and made friend groups outside of her team so that if she could not play – or no longer wanted to – she would not be afraid of her future. She would have a life outside of sports.

Discussion

The current study revealed how Black female student-athletes’ experiences that ran counter to their expectations of college at a PWI challenged their ability to make a smooth transition. Findings showed the limitations of sports on holistic student development in making the transition to college life socially, which is one aspect of identity that is critical to student integration and the pressure they put on the sport itself, i.e., team, coaching staff, to fill that social need. Part of the difficulty student-athletes shared was the time demand of practice, training, and competition. Combined with class schedules and studying, these demands left little time to participate in other areas of college life. Considering Tinto’s definition of social/student integration as both “the willingness *and the ability* [emphasis added] to belong to a group and to participate in the student culture” (Patton et al., 2016), it is clear that the student-athletes were willing to participate in the broader collegiate student culture but were unable to do so because of the demands on their time. Furthermore, those student-athletes who had carefully considered aspects of their college experience beyond their athletic participation seemed better prepared to make the transition in that they had more than one avenue of connection to pursue.

Tinto’s theory of engagement is at work in Laila’s social experience: high levels of engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, especially through social contact, supported integration to campus (Tinto, 1997). Laila had perhaps the highest expectation of student involvement in her college experience. Given her family traditions of college athletics and lasting friendships, she prioritized forming relationships on and off the team. With expectations and engagement matching, Laila regarded her transition to college positively. While Tinto (1997) theorized that a community built through classroom experience and relationships with faculty increased connections to college and, thereby, retention, no participant mentioned faculty as supports or mentors. Still, one participant lamented the lack of having the same faculty for more than one semester so she might have a chance to build a relationship. From a CCW framework, this aids in facilitating academic achievement through community support (Cooper et al., 2017). Consideration of academic purpose mattered more in forming a sense of self for these student-athletes than academic concern did. No one remarked on any academic frustration or difficulty in the first year of college. However, Gabby complimented the academic advisors and tutoring

resources that the Athletics Department provided, a resource noted as an institutional signal of value validation by Cooper et al. (2017).

The participants' discussion of community and where they found it (or made it) supports the research by Cooper and Newton (2021) on how a campus culture of belonging is critical for successful student integration within multiple aspects of identity, as is the support of family (Carter-Francique, 2014; Cooper et al., 2017; Harry, 2023; Helling & Chandler, 2021; Kennedy & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). The maintenance of old social ties in making the transition is consistent with the process detailed by Tinto (1997), as within the first year, the student-athletes were in the process of pulling away from their pre-college lives. They had not yet integrated into the college community, and for most participants, these ties served as support when they were not feeling connected on campus. In response to Tinto's theory, this study would suggest that Black female student-athletes may *not* need to separate fully from pre-college life within the first year of college; indeed, support from family and friends at home sustained many of the participants as they made the transition, especially given the prevalence of new technologies that make communication home easier.

The current study saw an isolating effect of the organizational structure and architecture of an athletics program similar to that which Foster (2003) observed, here compounded by intersectionality at a PWI in which Black women who were student-athletes may not have had the same opportunity to connect with other Black students outside of their identity of athletes. The effects of the time constraint mentioned above further isolated the participants. Participants who had experiences of feeling alienated or othered showed a shift in identity salience because of how White peers viewed them at that time. In the context of experiencing a party with White teammates, one participant felt a heightened awareness of her racial identity within a majority-White social scene. Here, the participant's perception that other students may judge her identity based on race caused this aspect of her identity to become salient. A tension between aspects of identity, such that the participant felt pulled between her identity as a female teammate taking part in a social activity and as being Black and thus set apart, shows the systemic pressure of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). While the context of each college experience impacts individual identity and college integration, the study also showed how others' views of the participants affected how they saw themselves.

The context of experience matters (Bruening et al., 2005), as Black female student-athletes are vulnerable to oppressions of race and gender within the largely White, male sport culture or within the broader culture of a PWI (Hesse-Biber et al., 2008). Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality initially demonstrated the systemic division of identity between race and sex. In the current study, participants often found that attention given to one area of their identity, i.e., sports, forced inattention/underdevelopment of another, i.e., socialization, particularly as a Black woman on a PWI campus. While this study did not intentionally set out to distinguish between the experiences of Black American students and Black international students, the findings made it clear that the additional level of cultural identity is worth exploring as an aspect of intersectionality that affects the transition and further complicates the impact of organizational culture.

The study aimed to explore the first-year transition experience of Black female student-athletes across aspects of identity. The findings revealed that there is sometimes a gap between

expectations and actual experiences, which is exacerbated if the student-athlete has not considered or imagined her college life from different angles or fully considered the culture of a PWI. The findings also suggest that the transition experience of a Black female student-athlete at a PWI is more nuanced than that of her White peers, for she must navigate more areas related to her identity. While the findings are specific to these participants and this setting, they provide suggestions for college practitioners and future studies.

Impact on Practice

This study showed that having clear expectations of college and understanding how to attain personal goals impacted the ability of Black female student-athletes to make an easier transition to college in the first year. Those expectations included becoming a part of a campus community – both as a team member and as a student with other interests. Faculty and staff who work in areas related to student-athletes should be mindful of the importance of holistic student involvement and willing to assist student-athletes in becoming active members of campus.

Considering the influence of institutional structures, faculty and staff are advised that “the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice *to increase student involvement*” [emphasis added] (Astin, 1984, p. 519). Four out of five participants raised the issue that the time demand for athletics often interfered with a student-athlete’s ability to become meaningfully involved in other areas of campus life. This, in turn, puts more pressure on the athletics program to provide social connectivity. To support more holistic development in student-athletes (Saxe et al., 2017), a recommendation at the departmental level would be for athletics advisors to encourage student-athletes’ participation in an extracurricular activity in other areas of the college/university, e.g., service, language club, etc. Such activities would enhance first-year student-athletes’ participation in campus life. Even before the arrival of student-athletes on campus, an institution could utilize social media group accounts through which entering students could connect and begin to form friendships based on similar interests early on.

As some student-athletes who had clear academic and social expectations and understood their own needs were better prepared to make the transition, athletics programs could support introspection on the part of the student-athlete. This might entail an in-depth discussion with an athletics advisor or an academic counselor about their educational goals, undertaken in the summer before the first semester. Once on campus, athletics programs could encourage the opportunity for personal reflection, e.g., journaling on the transition experience (Goodlad et al., 2019), as well as provide the opportunity to hear the experiences of older student-athletes. Programs like these offer a chance for holistic reflection and an outlet for mental health. This would foster the self-empowerment the participants in this study valued.

Given the accounts in this study of negative interactions with coaches, as well as positive recollections of supportive coaches in high school, the research findings suggest that it is prudent for institutions to train coaches to recognize the need to display support to their student-athletes athletically and holistically. Coaches should be encouraged to demonstrate caring for the student-athlete as a person who happens to play a sport, to increase positive communication, and to encourage extracurricular involvement among student-athletes.

Participants in this study raised the difficulties of othering at a PWI. Hence, a suggestion for academic advisors is to offer the option of conscious clustering of Black student-athletes in first-year required classes so that no one is the sole Woman/Person of Color. This does *not* mean requiring student-athletes to be siloed by identity within one class section but instead offering *options* for student-athletes of color to *choose* to take varied classes together if they *desire* to do so. If course clustering is not possible, a monthly meeting program hosted by the athletics department might provide support and a safe space on campus to share positive experiences, offset any negative stereotypes, and benefit student development and self-articulation of success (Carter-Francique, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2017; Elfman, 2020). To build community and create involvement beyond competition, if PWIs do not already have a club specific to Black student-athletes, they might consider establishing one to create a specific space of comfort and connection for students to gather and support one another.

As this study pointed to residence halls' role in forging first-year friendships, institutions should give Black female student-athletes more input into campus housing selections to make it easier to find comfort in hanging out with friends in the dorm. At the least, Black female student-athletes starting college should be housed in the same campus area as other first-year students. To make student-athletes feel more at home on campus, residence hall assistants might facilitate introductions of hallmates, and those willing to serve as mentors might be intentionally chosen for positions in the halls that house student-athletes. Student Life or the athletics department might create events similar to those students experienced back home, e.g., hosting a weekly or monthly dinner featuring foods from different cultures and regions, holding a board game night to offer another way to socialize rather than the party scene, and planning small shopping trips to the grocery store to pick up healthy foods would foster a sense of family and community among student-athletes.

This study showed the importance of family as a support system, so another recommendation would be for institutions of higher education and athletics departments to host welcome sessions directed at parents or key family members. These could be either live or virtual (which would be easier for those abroad) and would provide information about the process of the transition to college, the resources available to student-athletes, and opportunities in their first year, which is in keeping with the findings of Cooper et al. (2017) regarding familial capital. Institutions might take advantage of existing dates, e.g., Drop Off Day, Family Weekend, or the first home game, to host events that offer familial support and connection. Parents and family members who better understand what to expect in college may be more prepared to assist their student-athletes. Athletics departments might also consider creating mentoring, or *buddy*, systems for current parents/key family members of student-athletes with those new to the experience. In keeping with Carter and Hart's (2010) research indicating the importance of guides, supports, and role models, another recommendation would be for institutions to use their alumni relations programs to build a network of former student-athletes to serve as mentors for new college students, offer them a vision of the full college experience, and show them a path to graduation and beyond.

Limitations of the Study

In my positionality as the researcher, I am a White woman who is not a peer; participants may have withheld or diminished experiences in their reporting. While participants were clear

about their own responses, they often only alluded to “this experience,” “an experience,” and “like microaggressions, kind of” without elaborating.

Due to the small size of the study group ($N = 6$) and the site’s institutional identity, geographic setting, and culture as a PWI private institution, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger public. Also, the sociocultural dynamics of a religiously affiliated institution differ from those at a public secular institution and depend on an individual’s personal stance on faith. Future studies might compare transition experiences across different institutional aspects: public versus private, religiously affiliated versus secular, and large versus smaller.

The findings reflect the experiences of only those student-athletes who were willing to participate, a willingness that might have affected their responses. Despite being actively sought out, first-year students are missing from the research, and their reflections on more immediate experiences might differ from those of upper-level student-athletes who had time to mature and reflect. Including such student-athletes, I needed to frame questions to refer to the first year and to vet responses for events and incidents that might have occurred after that time. The study is also limited to student-athletes from a small number of the sports available at the study site; some sports did not yield any participants, and the cultures of those teams, their dynamics, and their relationship to their coaching staff may have reported different experiences or confirmed some of the experiences in these findings. This study did not explore socio-economic class, which may have impacted the ease with which student-athletes transitioned.

The results may also potentially reflect the effects of two large-scale events in 2020 on the transition experience and identity awareness of the participants, the killing of George Floyd and the global pandemic, which had impacted education at every level for two years at the time of the study. Given the pandemic protocols in place, participants who were in their sophomore year at the time of the study had a different experience in their first year of college than their junior and senior peers.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future study. One suggestion is to pursue more studies on the role of family members, especially mothers and coaches. This study did not go into detail as to whether coaches (both high school and college) were male or female, Black or White, to see if there was any connection between self-identity and that of the coach. Since the power of a negative coaching experience to derail the transition was apparent in this study, as previous research suggested (Burns et al., 2012), a close look at this relationship seems warranted. A future study with a larger participant pool might also develop insight into the impact of team dynamics on an individual’s sense of community or differing experiences between division levels.

Future research might also seek a longitudinal approach by asking first-year student-athletes about their expectations before arriving on campus and then checking in again after the first semester or at the end of senior year to see how those expectations were met and how much personal development occurred. Relatedly, future studies might ask more specific questions about academic expectations and first-year academic performance.

Another recommendation is for future research to measure the effect of socioeconomic status on the transition and integration experiences of Black female student-athletes at a PWI. Future studies might also consider gender and sexuality among Black female student-athletes. Finally, given shifting population demographics, future studies might weigh whether there are any distinctions between female student-athletes who identify as Black and those who identify as mixed race, or look more closely at the distinctions between Black student-athletes who are American versus those from other cultures/nationalities. The findings of this study suggest that some cultural differences for students who are not American might amplify feelings of difference and othering, as well as a distinctly American historical context for race that affects Black student-athletes from the U.S.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the experiences of how six Black female student-athletes experienced the transition to the first year of college. The participants shared how they had (or did not have) expectations of their college life in academics, athletics, and social life and how those expectations were met or not; the opportunities they pursued or were unable to take part in; and the challenges they experienced and the supports they used. The personal stories in this study show that the challenges of feeling othered by a minoritized racial identity at a PWI impacted the transition of most participants, mainly in their social lives, both on the team and off. However, by actively seeking out other students with whom they identified, either by race or through other interests, they were able to form supportive communities and attain a sense of belonging. Of interest is the self-empowerment that emerged through struggle, in that participants reported ways in which they were proud of their persistence and achievements and could now support others.

By allowing the participants to tell their stories of the transition experience, the study gave them the authority to show what mattered most. For some participants, this was the story of how they fulfilled their expectations of a well-rounded college life despite the demands of sports and academics. For others, this was the story of how they struggled because of cultural differences, alienation, or isolation as they were minoritized in a new setting. For each, though, the story told of how she persisted in identifying her needs and seeking a way to meet them. The stories are those of young women who have affirmed how they have grown since their first year of college and gained a clearer sense of self.

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