

UI Athletics Diversity Task Force Report

Background

The UI Athletics Diversity Task Force was established in the spring 2018 to address African American male graduation rates. The University of Iowa currently ranks at the bottom of the Big Ten Conference with a graduation rate of 42% for African American male student-athletes. The committee has two primary goals: 1) To be among the top three institutions within the Big Ten Conference with the highest African American male graduation rate by closing the gap between African American male student-athletes (42%) and their White student-athlete male peers (81%). 2) Achieve national recognition for UI Athletic efforts on diversity and inclusion by contending for the Diversity and Inclusion Award through the NCAA.

Committee Members

Broderick Binns	UI Athletics
John Bruno	Subcommittee Chair, UI Athletics
Eddie Etsey	UI Athletics
Andrew Francis	UI Athletics
Nicole Grosland	Faculty Athletic Representative
Raina Harmon	UI Athletics
Charles Martin-Stanley	Graduate student representative
Jamal Nelson	Office of Student Life
Mel Sanders	Subcommittee Chair, UI Athletics
Melissa Shivers	Vice President for Student Life, Interim Chief Diversity Officer
Liz Tovar	Task Force and Subcommittee Chair, UI Athletics
Vacant	Chief Diversity Officer

Process

The committee proposed a two-year timeline for this project which includes a three-phase process. Phase I was an assessment of UI Athletics to better understand the departmental climate towards diversity and the experiences of African American male student-athletes. Phase II and III will include developing effective strategies and implementation of practices to improve African American male student-athlete graduation rates based upon the recommendations from the assessment.

Phase I

This report includes the findings from the assessment phase which included interviews with student-athletes, coaches, staff, and administrators during the fall 2018 semester.

Areas of assessment were African American male student-athletes reasons for departure prior to graduation; recruitment standards and student-athlete expectations; athletic department

and team climate; and the African American male student-athlete experience on campus and in the community.

Findings

The Task Force was divided into three subcommittees charged with interviewing student-athletes, sport coaches, staff, and administrators. The following sections summarize prevalent themes from the interviews.

Student-Athlete Subcommittee

The student-athlete subcommittee identified 15 current and former African American student-athletes. In addition, 9 White student-athletes were interviewed. Students were identified based on their status as a student-athlete at the University of Iowa and randomly selected within their sports team.

One of the key themes was that African American **student-athletes do not feel comfortable being their authentic selves** (namely around coaches). Many African American students feel as though they have to “put on a mask” or “check their identity at the door” when they walk into athletic related activities (practice, meals, team meetings, etc.). The feeling of the majority of African American student-athletes interviewed was that they are not given enough freedom of expression to be themselves. The African American upperclassmen feel a burden to teach the freshmen how to dress, when to remove their earrings, how to do their hair, etc. As one student-athlete indicated, “I was told by my coach to change my hairstyle because it did not fit the Iowa culture. I can’t be free. I feel like a slave to the system”. Another student followed by saying, “the White student-athletes at Iowa are viewed as the standard that African American student-athletes should strive to mold themselves after”. The opportunity for African American student-athletes to be their genuine selves is not given freely. White student-athletes interviewed agreed that there “is a certain mold that students must fit into here at Iowa, and for student-athletes from Iowa it is easier for them to fit the mold”. The term mold was defined by students as “tough”, “hardworking”, “Iowa” or “White”. White and African American student-athletes agreed that it is the responsibility of “upperclassmen to teach underclassmen” such standards.

In contrast to the aforementioned theme, a positive theme emerged with regard to student-athletes perceptions of their campus environment. Nearly all student-athletes interviewed reported that **their experiences on campus and with the general student body have been positive**. The vast majority of the African American student-athletes indicated that while they do not get involved in many programs or have many friends outside of athletics, they have not been subjected to any prejudices or overt forms of racism. Most African American student-athletes mentioned that they are often “looked at as celebrities” and are not judged based on their race by the student body but rather their athletic participation. The majority of student-athletes cited time as the limiting factor that keeps them from getting involved on campus and interacting with non-student-athletes.

A few African American student-athletes alluded to the fact that their coaches have discouraged involvement in some campus organizations. One student-athlete went on record saying that,

"We are told to focus on one thing only, our sport. Everything else is a distraction, even having significant others. We are told to commit to the team first and only be friends with student-athletes."

Student-athletes choose to commit to the University of Iowa based on how they feel throughout the recruiting process. A common theme was that **few African American student-athletes feel like they are connected to the support system (team) that recruited them**. Many feel that coaches don't take the time to understand what is going on in their personal lives, how they are feeling or if they are struggling. One student-athlete said that his coach "brushed off a death in the family", "he was not sympathetic and I did not feel supported". A number of African American student-athletes feel a sense of isolation, which many believe was a key factor in their African American student-athlete peers decision's to transfer. A number of African American student-athletes interviewed reported that they did not see the "Iowa culture" (i.e., the difference in treatment between African American and White student-athletes or the inability for African Americans to be themselves) on their recruiting trip and if they had, they would have never committed to this university. White student-athletes agreed that there is "an Iowa Culture" which they described as being "hardworking", and that "geographical rather than racial differences may cause students not from this area to feel alienated and wanting to leave". In contrast, White student-athletes mentioned that if they want support "they feel comfortable talking to their coaches if they have a problem or concern". White student-athletes from this region mentioned they "have the ability to go home" and find a support system. Also, unlike their African American peers, White student-athletes reported that their experiences during their recruitment was in line with their experiences once on campus. Specifically, their "expectations in the recruiting process matched what they experienced when they arrived on campus". One White student-athlete recommended more diversity in terms of "authority figures" within the department. For example, "when Athletics staff members speak with our team they are generally White men" and that "African American male student-athletes don't see individuals who look like them" within our department.

Nearly all African American student-athletes interviewed used the term "double-standard" to describe **the difference between how African American student-athletes are treated in relation to their White peers**. Nearly all of the African American student-athletes interviewed believe that one of the predominant reasons that African American student-athletes leave is because of the way they are talked to by coaches and some support staff while their White peers are not subjected to the same negative interactions. Many examples were shared of African American student-athletes being cursed at, ridiculed and embarrassed in front of their peers. Some student-athlete interviewed feel that their White peers are not spoken to in such a

disrespectful way. White student-athletes believed some students are treated differently, but they attribute this to “geographical” rather than racial differences. For example, students not from this region may have a difficult time understanding the expectation of “hard work” and “doing things right all the time, both academically and socially”. One White student-athlete mentioned that African American athletes are “tested more for drugs” than White student-athletes, and “White student-athletes stay off the radar”.

Many student-athletes, both White and Black, believe there is a **short period of time to make a good impression and that the margin of error is perceived to be much smaller for African American student-athletes**. Many student-athletes spoke about some of their African American peers who have transferred or asked to leave because they were not meeting Iowa’s expectations. One student shared an experience of a staff member cursing and degrading an African American student-athlete in front of peers for not doing something the right way. According to the reporting student,

“That set the tone for that kid and he left a week later. I personally have experienced this at least once per week since I have been here, but I have thicker skin. This isolates the students of color who may not have the mental fortitude to withstand all of the bullshit by themselves and they don’t have someone of the same color to go to. It’s hard to be ourselves around coaches. If you are, you are vulnerable and will be taken advantage of”.

Furthermore, many students reported that the African American student-athletes feel that when their White peers commit similar disciplinary infractions, the “punishments are not equal based on race”. When students are disciplined for failing to adhere to the expectations coaches have for them, they feel that it is a “death sentence” and then coaches will work to slowly push you out the door and give someone else the scholarship who can live up to the expectations of the “Iowa Way” (i.e., the difference in treatment between African American and White student-athletes and the inability for African Americans to be themselves). The perception of the African American student-athletes is that their White peers miss tutoring, are late to meetings but do not see their playing time diminish or other disciplinary measures that are equitable to what they have experienced for the same offense. Some White student-athletes reported that they do not believe there is a “double standard”, however, “there is a very short window of opportunity to prove yourself”. If you do not prove yourself you will be “pushed out and that it is hard to recover even for one mistake”. One White student-athlete mentioned that African American student-athlete departure is a “recognizable area of concern” especially within the student’s cohort and that trend appears to get worse every year.

Staff and Administrator Subcommittee

The subcommittee identified 15 staff members who hold either a senior level or mid-level management position within UI Athletics. Ten men and 5 women were interviewed. They were selected because of their interaction with student-athletes and coaches, their ability as a

manager to hire and therefore influence diversity within UI athletics, and the ability to impact departmental policy pertaining to student-athlete persistence and graduation.

Of the key themes was that **staff and administrators lacked awareness of the experiences of African American student-athletes**. Specifically, there is disconnect between the perceptions of staff and administrators and the actual experiences of African American athletes. For example, staff and administrators acknowledged that African American student-athletes have never explicitly approached them with concerns, and additionally staff and administrators have not actively sought out feedback from African American student-athletes about their experiences. There is a belief that if there's a problem or concern students will report them and that staff and administrators believe "student-athletes seem to have a positive experience" at Iowa. When asked about assessing team culture, staff and administrators mentioned they conduct regular performance evaluations and provide feedback to coaches. When asked about accountability on the part of coaches in terms of improving graduation rates, staff and administrators demonstrated a level of concern, but lacked substantive methods for addressing such issues outside of a yearly performance evaluation. It is unclear what, if any, repercussions there are for teams not improving their African American graduation rates. According to one staff member "there is disconnect between the administration and what transpires within certain teams".

Another theme was the noticeable lack of diversity among non-coaching staff members, including senior administrators, middle level managers, and support staff. Staff and administrators define diversity as "different identities, thoughts, and opinions that a person holds at any given time", some of which are more salient than others. They believe representation of identities among staff members is important and impacts the experiences for African American student-athletes. For example, it was reported that "athletic department staff should be reflective and representative of the student-athlete population". Unfortunately, African American male student-athletes have few staff members within UI Athletics with whom they can personally identify, resulting in fewer opportunities for mentorship and guidance. Additionally, it was noted that if African American male athletes want a supportive environment "they have to look for resources", unlike their White peers. For example, minorities are underrepresented in key support areas such as mental health, strength and conditioning, athletic training, and student development.

It was reported that while the Athletics Department has "done a good job of emphasizing the importance of diversity", the **department lacks results in achieving diversity among staff members**. There were several explanations including the difficulty of recruiting diverse staff who are not from the region, figuring out how to "sell Iowa" to prospective employees, and not consciously thinking about diversity as a variable when hiring for positions. Although the department has a long standing policy that encourages diversity among prospective candidates, this has not resulted in a more diverse department. When asked about discussing diversity, specifically race, it was reported that as a department individuals are not open to talking about

race, and treat such conversations “as if we were checking a box”. One possible explanation for why racial issues are not discussed was staff being “uncomfortable with constructive conflict”, which prevents us from addressing our implicit and explicit biases. One staff member suggested that the topic of diversity needs to be “engrained throughout the department and emphasized in the Strategic Plan, as much as winning, graduating, and doing things the right way”.

Regarding possible **reasons for African American student-athlete departures, the most common themes were attributed to lack of playing time and lack of belongingness in the community.** Some staff members felt that playing time for African American students who have not established their community outside of athletics may exacerbate the negative perceptions of their experience as a student-athlete. The question of how African American student-athletes adjust to the community and what activities they are engaged in outside of sports is important for retention. For example, if an African American student-athlete struggles athletically and experiences lack of community, they may be less likely to persist at Iowa. Furthermore, if an African American student-athlete is not engaged on campus and in the community, “they have no reason to want to stay at Iowa other than athletic purposes”. When asked about whether student-athletes are encouraged to become actively involved in the community, it was reported that some coaches either do not actively encourage or may even discourage student-athletes from becoming a part of the community. There were several explanations including the importance of “controlling messaging to student-athletes” from individuals outside of the program, the “perception that non-student-athlete groups lead to more trouble”, and “student-athletes are experiencing greater commitments to their sport”.

Lack of trust between African American student-athletes and their Coaches also emerged as a key reason for African American student-athlete departure. “African American student-athletes may be distrustful of the people they come into contact with in the Department, because they do not understand our true motivations”. Specifically, African American student-athletes may be more distrustful of coaches and administrators, and avoid talking openly about negative experiences because of the authority coaches and administrators have over playing time and scholarships. In addition, there is a belief that there is a “distrustful relationship between some support units who work with specific teams and student-athletes”. Staff reported that for all athletes, but specifically African American student-athletes, “performance and trust are interrelated”. If a student-athlete trusts his/her coach they are more likely to want to play for them. Staff reiterated the importance of students understanding that coach’s care. For African American student-athletes, the need to build a constructive and positive relationship is even more important. The lack of trust between African American student-athletes and coaches may be due to a perceived shift in Athletic Department culture that “our department is more distrustful of student-athletes now than ten years ago”. In particular, “we are more likely to question, place blame, or assume guilt, particularly on the part of African American student-athletes”. Staff members suggested that the Athletics Department needs to be more cognizant of messaging to African American student-athletes about our culture. Administrators are

responsible for managing an effective departmental culture, but coaches are responsible for establishing an environment where student-athletes know they are valued.

Student expectations during the recruitment process is another theme that may contribute to the problem with African American male graduation rates. Although “all students are recruited based on their athletic ability, for African American student-athletes, this may be heightened”. It is unknown how honest coaches are with students during the recruitment process, however, African American student-athletes may have greater difficulty adjusting to the “true environment after the recruiting process”. Those who are not from this region, may have more challenges adapting to Iowa, similar to non-student-athletes. Staff mentioned African American student-athletes may lack support in the academic setting because faculty, staff, and students question African American student-athletes academic motivations and see their athletic identity more so than their academic identity. As compared to their White male peers who graduate at a 40% higher rate, African American student-athletes are experiencing more academic stereotypes on campus because their identities are more salient than White student-athletes at Iowa.

Coaching Subcommittee

The subcommittee identified 11 staff members who hold positions as head coach, assistant coach, Director of Operations, athletic training, or strength and conditioning. Nine men and 3 women were interviewed.

Of the key themes that emerged in the interviews was lacking **knowledge of graduation rates for specific student-athlete groups, especially, African American male student-athletes at Iowa.** Coaches reported being “surprised” to hear such low graduation rates for African American student-athletes. In addition, they reported “not noticing any problems or concerns with any one group of student-athletes”. When asked why African American student-athletes are graduating at lower rates than their White peers, coaches associated low graduation rates to academic factors, even though few African American student-athletes have departed the University because of academic eligibility or poor academic standing. In addition, coaches attributed low graduation rates to factors outside of their own personal control or team culture. For example, coaches mentioned “family dynamics”, “attitudes toward education” and “student upbringing” as reasons for departure as well as professional opportunities within their sport.

Regarding the treatment of African American student-athletes there were several themes, including a sentiment of complacency and low expectations of African American student-athletes. Coaches reported that they treat student-athletes the same. However, how African American and White student-athletes were described by coaches was different. For instance, White student-athletes were more likely to be described as being from a “two parent home”, “good upbringing”, “smart”, “tough”, “talented”, whereas African American student-athletes

were described by their “socio-economic background”, “tough upbringing”, or “at-risk”. A staff member reported that “student-athletes are more attuned to discriminatory behaviors than what coaches or administrators give them credit”. Although some coaches believe that more African American student-athletes were seen as at-risk, they believe every student has the opportunity to get off the proverbial “at-risk list”. Finally, coaches were more likely to discuss what African American athletes can do for the University, and less about what the institution, Athletics, and their team can do to help the student-athlete.

Assimilation into Iowa culture is a barrier for African American male student-athlete persistence. Some coaches reported that student-athletes of color who “do not assimilate” to the cultural expectations of Iowa are more likely to leave. With regard to student-athletes of color, “assimilation” meant “don’t do anything to draw unwarranted attention to yourself athletically or socially”. Coaches recognized “differences in needs between students from different groups”, and reported having individualized meetings which has been an effective strategy in creating stronger relationships with students. Overall, coaches believed that relationships with student-athletes is based on trust and creating open dialogue.

Difficulty in recruiting African American student-athletes to the University of Iowa was also a theme among coaches. Coaches reported the need to educate recruits about the Iowa City community and combatting stereotypes about Iowa. All coaches mentioned the “uniqueness of Iowa” and prospective student-athlete perceptions about the University of Iowa. Our culture is “unique which makes maintaining and graduating African American student-athletes difficult”. Some coaches implied that the White culture of Iowa is more unique than that of other predominantly White institutions. Several coaches attributed problems with recruitment and retention of African American student-athletes to “just not liking Iowa”. The sentiment about minorities not liking Iowa is prevalent among many members of the Department who have come to accept it, thus giving the impression of lacking a sense of urgency for changing the culture because it is not within their control.

Demonstrating diversity among student-athletes, coaches, faculty, and staff is critical for the successful recruitment of African American student-athletes. Although coaches noted the importance of having such resources available during the recruitment process, little insight was given as to how they fostered relationships or the need for such resources after the African American student arrives on campus. Similarly, coaches noted the importance of having African American coaches on staff, but did not mention their strategies for the advancement of African American coaches and maintaining a pipeline for recruiting more minority coaches.

The final theme pertained to the **importance of mentorship for African American students.** Several coaches discussed mentoring programs for African American Student-Athletes in the 80’s and 90’s. Some suggested bringing back such opportunities. **Coaches described mentoring** and student programming opportunities which involved former African American student-athletes. Less discussed was how or if they utilize campus and community leaders who are not a part of Athletics.

The following recommendations are based upon the above findings and consistent with the goals of the Diversity Task Force Committee.

DIVERSITY TASK FORCE AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE

- The Diversity Task Force should continue to function in a consultative role to the senior administration and ensure the recommendations of the review are effectively implemented.
- Establish an African American student-athlete advisory group that reports to the Athletic Director.
- Mandate a yearly meeting between African American student-athletes and the President's Office.

DIVERSIFICATION OF STAFF

- Diversify athletic department staff, specifically, coaches, administrators, and personal support staff.
- Establish a permanent, senior management position that addresses diversity issues.

COMMUNICATION, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION

- Public statement to staff, student-athletes, and coaches, that we are actively addressing student-athlete concerns and graduation rates.
- Develop team specific programs to address issues pertaining to diversity that offer a safe environment to discuss controversial topics.
- Break down barriers for open communication - utilize and promote campus resources such as the Campus Inclusion Team.
- Provide educational opportunities for coaches on effective strategies during the recruiting process, including communication standards for African American parents.
- All staff, including coaches should be trained yearly on community and campus resources that serve African American student populations.

MENTORSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS

- Establish cross-cultural mentorship opportunities within teams.
- Establish a yearly partnership between the Office of Student Life and Athletics to develop mentorship and social opportunities for African American student-athletes.