65-minute Panel

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The State of HBCU Athletics: The Three P’s - Past, Present, & Persistence - Where Do We Go From Here?

The tradition of intercollegiate athletics at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is filled with a rich legacy of success including the presence of legendary coaches, outstanding student athletes, and a unique connection to African American cultural heritage and empowerment. The unique cultural identity among HBCU athletic programs consist of three multi-level major paradigms: racial pride, cultural expression, and Black masculinity (Fink, 2003). However, in recent years, HBCU athletic programs have experienced significant challenges maintaining a positive brand image. Recent media coverage of the cancellation of the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) championship football game between Winston Salem State University (WSSU) and Virginia State University (VSU) due to a pre-game altercation between players from each team, the Grambling State football players’ boycott, Spelman College cutting its intercollegiate programs to afford campus-wide wellness programs, the removal of the football program at Paul Quinn College to establish an agriculture farm, and the persistently low academic performance among HBCU athletic programs (e.g., low academic progress rates (APRs) among Division I HBCU programs and low graduation rates of HBCU athletic teams across all divisions) raise concerns about the educational value and financial sustainability of these athletic programs (Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012). In an effort to identify and present feasible solutions to address the challenges facing HBCU athletic programs, the authors conducted a comprehensive literature review on the topic. The following key themes were identified from the literature: 1) the historical significance of HBCU athletic programs, 2) the sociocultural value of HBCU athletic programs, and 3) the evolving economic status and business practices associated with HBCU athletic programs.

An analysis of the literature revealed HBCUs face a confluence of challenges related to various societal (macro) factors such as systemic racism and economic deprivation (Gaither, 2013; Wiggins, 2000; Hodge, Bennett, & Collins, 2013), structural inequalities (meso) within intercollegiate athletic associations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Johnson, 2013; Liligil, 2009), and institutional factors (micro) such as administrative turnover and poor financial management (Hosick, 2011). Since their inception, HBCUs have had to fulfill their educational missions with fewer resources than their predominantly White institution (PWI) counterparts (Hodge, Bennett, & Collins, 2013). At the structural level (meso) level, a large number of HBCUs are members of the NCAA. However, as non-members of the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) and automatic-qualifier (AQ) conferences, HBCU conferences such as the CIAA, Mid-Eastern Atlantic Conference (MEAC), Southern Intercollegiate Athletic
Conference (SIAC), and the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) have limited access to the multi-million dollars generated through broadcasting and sponsorship rights with annual post-season athletic contests (Lillig, 2009). Although, the NCAA has recognized limited resource institutions such as HBCUs face unique challenges and provide additional financial support and lenient time frames for compliance (Brown, 2012; Reynolds, Fisher, & Cavil, 2012; Hosick, 2012), the mere fact that these institutions are penalized for essentially not producing the same academic progress or graduation rates as institutions that have been unjustly enriched by systemic racist practices and policies is deeply problematic (Feagin, 2006).

However, despite possessing fewer resources and having a significant portion of their athletic talent drained by integration policies and the practice of forced assimilation during the 1960s, HBCUs have continued to demonstrate consumer valuation and ticket price efficiency, significant economic vitality with their annual classics and homecoming events (Cavil, 2013; Drayer, Irwin, & Martin, 2011; Armstrong, 2001, 2008; Jackson, Lyons, & Gooden, 2001). Related to student athletes’ experiences at HBCUs, previous research has also highlighted the unique educational and sociocultural environments at these institutions contribute to positive developmental outcomes for these student athletes such as higher levels of academic achievement, sense of belonging, persistence towards graduation, and positive self-identities (Charlton, 2011; Cooper & Hawkins, 2012; Hodge, Collins, & Bennett, 2013). In fact, some research has found using alternative metrics for academic success that HBCU athletic teams are actually outperforming their PWI counterparts at least at the Division I level (Southall et al., 2013). Collectively, this review of literature provides insight into the unique challenges facing HBCUs as well as ideas for progressive outcomes moving forward. The purpose of this panel will be to explore the historical significance, current state, and future recommendations associated with HBCU athletic programs. The authors will offer a range of recommendations including the Ten Pillars for Active Engagement for Sport Leadership & Administration in creating Athletic Organizational Success & Sustainability that HBCU athletic programs can employ to enhance their collective brand and positive outcomes for its educational stakeholders.

References


