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College Athletes, Social Justice, and the Role of Social Workers in Advocating for Change

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Social justice activism from college athletes is considered a rare occurrence often due to the intensity of negative public response and the possibility of athletic repercussions. The likelihood of negative reactions did not stop the unique, highly publicized protests at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri. These protests set the tone for college athlete unionization and a new era of college athlete activism. College athletes recognize their power as corporate brands and standing as a group made it so their voices had to be heard or else face financial consequences. While these protests achieved their initial goals, their silence in the aftermath lessens that power and increases the consequences of negative response. These college athletes should be encouraged and supported to speak out on matters that concern their lives like any other student through social work advocacy.

This article will address how social workers should be advocates for college athletes engaging in social activism by using the protests at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri as examples. These examples highlight why college athletes may be reluctant to use their influence, what motivates them to speak out, and illustrate the need for social workers to assist in encouraging lasting change. Social workers must be aware of their campus environment and be involved in advocacy to assist college athletes in using their voices for change.

Keywords: sport, advocacy, social justice

Social justice activism by college athletes is portrayed as a rare occurrence, often due to the intensity of negative response and backlash. College athletes; however, have historically spoken out on social issues impacting their lives. These athletes represent a unique population on college campuses seen by critics as separate from the rest of the student body due to their relative fame and the time constraints of athletics (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). However, studies suggest that college athletes are involved in the undergraduate experience similar to their non-athlete peers (Richards & Aries, 1999; Stone & Strange, 1989; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh & Hannah, 2006 as cited in Gayles, 2009). Part of the undergraduate experience includes campus activism because it helps increase a student's critical thinking capabilities, civic engagement, and connection to their community (Barnhardt & Reyes, 2016). While this activism can be done through individual action, students (both athletes and non-athletes) have also gathered as groups to protest their concerns. These collective protests are better equipped to highlight the power of college athletes as a unit to produce change even with the threat of backlash.

College athlete activism is not without consequence. After the activism of the 1960s and 70s, fans and athletes alike rely on sport as a refuge from social realities. Candaele and Dreier (2004) noted that apolitical acts of kindness (hospital visits, say no to drugs campaigns, etc.) are socially accepted, but becoming a jock for justice and speaking out in favor of social justice can tarnish an individual's image and brand. These college athletes should not fear the consequences of participation in campus activism. Instead, advocates are necessary to encourage these athletes to use their voices for good and ensuring that the experience does not impact their mental health.

This article will address how social workers can and should be advocates for college athletes engaging in social activism by using the protests at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri as examples. In these examples, the influence of outside sources like social workers could assist athletes in allowing their voices to be heard long-term, not just for a temporary fix. Using these protests, this article will discuss what conditions led to the protests, the responses (both immediate and long-term), and the implications for social work practice. Social workers are tasked with promoting social justice and social change for clients (National Association of Social Workers, NASW, 2008). College athletes are a group in need of advocacy because they are a vulnerable population due to the public spotlight and they are in need of those who can be sensitive to the cultural and ethnic diversity concerns that spur activism on college campuses.

Literature Review

For all of their popularity on campus and potentially beyond, college athletes represent a vulnerable population. Kroshus (2014) noted that college athletes face the same mental health risk factors as other students, but are also exposed to additional environmental risk factors, including stress (both internal and external) and experiences with harassment or discrimination. This harassment does not have to be focused solely on their experiences during sport. Those incidents may instead function as a reminder of their difficulties outside the sport environment, which may silence an athlete who wishes to seek activism. To combat these external stressors, Kroshus (2014) recommends providing resources to help athletes cope with stress or simply providing support and understanding as a mentor.

Social work provides the resources and support that college athletes may need. The theoretical perspectives on which the profession is based offer a lens to view and assist populations that are vulnerable or oppressed. Social workers, for the purpose of this paper include faculty, practicing professionals, and social work students. Becoming advocates for college athletes who are oppressed or being discriminated against is one way that social workers can model this type of intervention. The values of the social work profession call social workers to action in these situations (NASW, 2008). Honoring the dignity and worth of each person spurs us to engage with college athletes, to practice competently with integrity, to assess their environment, and to understand their psychosocial stressors. The values of service, social justice, and dignity and worth of the person compel social workers to intervene on behalf of college athletes and to empower them to overcome barriers and address inequities on campus.

Social workers should be advocates for college athletes and help address inequities on campus, as well as in the community. Understanding college athlete motivations and concerns in relation to the campus climate goes a long way towards developing an inclusive, open environment for all students. Social movements, like student activism, is an area where social workers highlight the need for macro skills to be taught in a way that does not minimize the importance of this area of practice (Rice, Girvin, Frank, & Foels, 2016). The use of empowerment and social cognitive theories, as an example, provides the foundation to assist and encourage college athletes to speak out and fight for what they believe.

Social workers that approach practice from an empowerment perspective focus on social justice and human rights, realizing that individuals and groups that experience oppression and discrimination face disproportionately more negative effects related to economic and political struggles (Turner & Mashi, 2015). As noted previously, college athletes represent a vulnerable population due to additional environmental risk factors (Kroshus, 2014). Assessment of the issues affecting the client/client system must include their own definition of the problem or issues, as well as their strengths, which is a critical component of empowerment (Turner & Mashi, 2015). The empowerment perspective should always be considered in the assessment process, thus asking the college athletes, in this case, their perspective about the issues and helping them develop strategies to create the needed campus and community changes. Power is another important concept in empowerment (Kirst-Ashman, 2014) and applies here as the teammates used the threat of a boycott to effect change. Together, the group was more powerful. Awareness of this power and other personal characteristics for motivation will assist and encourage college athletes in their activism efforts.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1988) suggests that the environment, personal characteristics such as cognition, and behavior are reciprocal and influence each other. Competencies are developed through mastery modeling, strengthening beliefs in one's own capabilities and enhancing self-motivation by setting goals. Self-belief, or self-efficacy is essential to being successful when setting goals. This is a useful theory when working with college athletes, as they have been successful in their area of sport. Social workers can help them see how that can be used to be successful in other areas (Moore, 2016), like student activism, when working to address inequities on campus. In later work, Bandura (2001) expanded this notion of individual efficacy to include the power of the collective. When individuals work together to produce a desired outcome, their collective efficacy is synergized. The individual intentions, skills and knowledge of humans can combine to form a collective efficacy. A group collective emerges, which strengthens the resolve, and can lead to increased motivation and persistence through setbacks, and greater results (Bandura, 2001). This collective efficacy

influences the groups' goal setting, use of resources, perseverance through challenges, and helps them overcome vulnerabilities. The collective power of the group is a phenomenon that works across cultures, within a diverse milieu (Bandura, 2002).

Social workers can work with college athletes to empower them and strengthen self-efficacy to meet their goals when advocating in situations on campus. Working within the collective can provide the synergy needed to make lasting change. Using this approach can be useful as gains made in one area can serve as reinforcement that success in other areas can be achieved. This can aid in making sustainable changes and empowering college athletes to advocate for social justice whenever issues arise. Promoting empowerment and self-efficacy is key for promoting continuous assessment of the campus and community environment and aiding in decision-making about when and how to get involved.

Empowering these athletes to fight for what they believe in requires understanding their motivation. The initial motivation of these athletes' activism resides in the concerns existing on campus. Their desire to use their voice as an agent for change; however, can be directly linked to the new wave of athlete activism. Dr. Edwards, a leading figure in the study of Black athlete activism, referred to this current period as the fourth wave of athlete activism (Edwards, 2016). Dr. Edwards is known for working with both professional and collegiate athletes on issues of race and activism. Dr. Edwards previously assisted college athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith in their protest during the 1968 Olympics and the second wave of athlete activism (Lipsyte, 1988). The infamous black power gesture during the Games was used to protest the state of race relations in America. These athletes were ultimately punished for their action, but motivated others to speak out on the social issues of the time (Roach, 2002). While Edwards' work focuses on Black athlete activism, the same motivations are present with all athletes under this current era of athlete activism.

This wave imagery highlights the ebb and flow of athletes being advocates for change throughout history. The first wave began with Jesse Owens who, when asked about a proposed boycott of the 1936 Olympics, stated that the United States must withdraw from the Olympics if there was discrimination against minorities in Germany (Schaap, 2007). Owens' desire to fight for a better situation for himself and others was used throughout history as a rallying cry for athletes in similar situations (Edwards, 2016; Spivey, 1983). Those in the first two waves of athlete activism, as described by Dr. Edwards (2016), were motivated by social and legal inequality within the United States. Their rebellions were deemed to be either misguided or ungrateful by the general public. The backlash they received, even as these social reforms were made in American society, ultimately led to a long period of social passivity among athletes (Edwards, 2016).

Unlike the social inequalities of the first two waves, the third wave of Black athlete activism (typically focused on the early 1990s to the new millennium) was characterized by the social and financial success of professional athletes. During this wave, athletes became corporate brands that must cautiously act to avoid criticism (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010). The amount of personal gain associated with an athlete's commercial presence far exceeds their earnings from athletic prowess. Branding requires careful navigation of differing opinions and attitudes connected to race relations in America, leading to inaction. Michael Jordan famously once said, "Republicans wear sneakers too," in response to requests for Jordan to actively campaign for an African-American candidate for the U.S. Senate in North Carolina in 1990 (Kahn, 2012, p. 3). The fact that college athletes today choose to use their voice to speak out

against social and financial inequality after growing up in an era of athlete passivity speaks to their larger concerns and ushers in a new wave of athlete activism.

In an exploratory study on Black male college athletes' perception of race and athlete activism, Agyemang and colleagues (2010) concluded that today's Black athlete has a different mentality and mindset towards issues of social justice while also lacking a willingness to engage in activism. The motivations of the past lie with governmental action to deinstitutionalize racism within the legal system whereas the current focus is on addressing racial ideologies still present in society. These students noted an awareness of continuing problems within society, but illustrated hesitance to participate due to personal motivations (Agyemang et al., 2010). Despite knowing that race continues to matter, and being aware of what was done in the past, these college athletes asserted that their lack of action was motivated by apathy, increased focus on competition, their financial future, and avoiding criticism.

The fourth wave of athlete activism differs because it is no longer based on a rebellion and highlights the legitimacy of power available to college athletes. As the boycotts at Grambling State and the University of Missouri show, these athletes chose to operate as a group and stand as a united front for change. Their decision to speak out as a group shows an understanding that they would wield more power in this way. These athletes understand the legitimacy of their athleticism and how that can be used to cultivate change. College athletes are corporate power brokers for their respective universities because they have the power to generate millions of dollars in funding for the school. This push for action can be financially motivated (through questions regarding college athlete pay and the condition of playing surfaces and other accommodations), but is largely a social call to action to promote change for themselves and others.

These motivations may silence the individual athlete's voice, explaining the need for support from social workers. But there is power in the actions of unified college athletes to impart change and can be utilized by social workers to further encourage those who seek activism. Historically speaking, many collective group protests revolve around living conditions and other concerns at the university. At Historically Black Colleges and Universities, collective protests highlighted student discontent about conditions on campus (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016). Similar protests at predominately White institutions tend to focus on racial strife (Freedman, 2015). Although occurring on few campuses, these protests could be seen as symptomatic of the times, especially in this new era where college athletes are corporate brands.

Considering the consequences and potential losses, some college athletes have decided to use their voice to speak out against injustice as a unified team. Grambling State University's football team refused to play until their facilities were improved (Anderson, 2013). The University of Missouri's football team joined with a protest group on campus to call for the resignation of the university president for his failure to address concerns with racism on campus (Resmovits, 2015). These examples of united college athlete activism illustrate the collective power of athletes on college campuses, while highlighting a need to protect these voices. Not only should the focus be on why they have chosen to speak, but on how to protect that speech to create a healthy dialogue for all.

Method

The focus of supporting college athlete activism is not on being a voice for the voiceless, but passing the microphone (Khabeer, 2017). As a result, this paper addresses how social

workers should be advocates when college athletes are engaging in activism. The authors present the argument as to why social workers involvement in advocating for college athletes is beneficial to engage in this responsibility using the case study method. According to Yin (2003, p. 2) “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” because “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events.” This study will examine the impact of activism and the need for social workers through two specific incidents at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri.

It is important to know that a case study is not a method but a research strategy (Hartley, 2004; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). Or, put differently: “[c]ase study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2000, p. 435). Therefore, a case study cannot be defined through its research methods, but rather in terms of its theoretical orientation and interest in individual cases (Hartley, 2004; Stake, 2000). A case study is a preliminary method for exploring relatively new concerns and provides the description of a social phenomenon and highlights the impact and future direction of concerns and research related to this phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

It should be noted upfront that there is a limitation to this particular analysis. This study was not a traditional in-depth case analysis as resources were limited to what was available through the press. The researchers considered multiple sources of data for this study but focused on journalistic materials and conducted document analysis of those resources (Bowen, 2009). The researchers used a checklist to guide them through the analysis process so that uniformity and consistency was assured, which included opinions, facts, and unexpected insights. Researchers utilized analytic memo writing (Saldana, 2015) and searched for pertinent information that led toward a deeper understanding of the history, experiences, challenges, and changes associated with issues at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri. The focus on journalistic materials was to present the public nature of this issue, to challenge perception, and to highlight how social workers could change that narrative.

These two incidents are high-profile examples that allowed for thorough discussion and review of college athlete activism. Their stories achieved national recognition because of the rarity of their actions, and the financial ramifications thereof. Further, the boycotts at Grambling State and the University of Missouri and the aftermath (immediate and long-term) highlights why college athletes may be reluctant to use their influence, what motivates them to speak out, and illustrates the need for social workers to assist in encouraging lasting change.

Background to Protest

In 2013 and 2015, respectively, two football programs received national attention for their collective protest against conditions at their universities. While one went through with the threat to boycott games, both achieved successes before ending their collective stance. Protests like these among college athletes are rare. College athletes may seem to exert a lot of power and privilege on college campuses, but this power does not come without challenges.

It should be noted that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I membership institutions, including both Grambling State and the University of Missouri, hold a financial weapon against college athletes. NCAA Bylaws 15.3.4.2 (2014) and 15.3.5.1 (2015) allow schools to cancel an athletic grant-in aid for a player who withdraws from a sport at any time for personal reasons. Refusing to play because of social injustice could be enough to trigger

this response from a school or university. However, this action by the athletic department could lead to potential backlash when the cause of withdrawal from athletics competition is a social justice issue (Thomas, 2015). Public reaction to collective protests from college athletes ranges from support to increased scrutiny calling for the type of action allowed through these NCAA bylaws (ESPN, 2015). Even with this varied response, the fear of negative backlash remains for the college athletes and can explain why some athletes may choose to speak out as a group instead of remaining silent as individuals. There is no evidence through related news reports that social workers were present during these boycotts. Their absence could have an impact on the long-term effectiveness of college athlete activism.

Grambling State University. For the Grambling State University football players, their decision to protest in 2013 arose from the conditions impacting the athletic department and the team specifically. Funding at the university underwent serious cuts in the years leading up to the boycott. A drop in state aid to Grambling State and other state institutions in Louisiana was the cause of these financial issues and the budget shortfall affecting renovations along with travel accommodations (Freedman, 2013). According to university spokesman, Will Sutton, the athletics' department budget for the 2013-14 school year was \$6.8 million, an amount that reflects a \$335,000 cut from previous years. Football, specifically, was asked to cut \$75,000 from their \$2 million budget (Schroeder, 2013).

These financing concerns only provided another hurdle for a struggling athletic department and increased tensions between athletics and university administration. Due to funding concerns, college athletes were sometimes traveling as many as 1500 miles to and from road games by bus. Facilities used by athletes on campus were also in serious need of repair. The floor of the weight room, as an example, had missing and/or uneven tiles that could pose a tripping hazard. Doug Williams, then head coach of the team and Grambling State alumna, secured financing for a new floor through a private booster organization. This new flooring was not installed because university administration officials stated that proper fundraising procedures were not followed (Freedman, 2013). Williams secured financing and made this subsequent purchase without informing the school President or the Athletic Director (Anderson, 2013). Tensions between Williams and the university administration eventually culminated in Williams' firing after the team lost their first two games of the 2013-14 season. This loss was their 12th in the team's past 13 games (Sheinin, 2013).

After Williams was fired on September 9, 2013, many people on campus believed that his firing was because of a power struggle with school President, Frank Pogue (Anderson, 2013). George Ragsdale, the running backs coach under Williams, was promoted to interim head coach. The administration, including Pogue and Athletic Director Aaron James, planned to meet with the team to discuss this change and the issues concerning Grambling football immediately after William's firing. However, by the time the meeting occurred on October 15, 2013, tensions culminated in a player walk-out (Anderson, 2013).

During this meeting, the players detailed their concerns and frustrations related to the state of the program. These players felt the response from the administration was unsatisfactory, refused to show up for practice for the next two days, and sent a letter to university administration addressing college athlete concerns.

We, the Grambling State University Football team, come to you with the intent to make a complaint against Grambling State University Administration, and to reach some type of solution. We would like support and assistance while reaching this solution. As a team

our goal is to build a solid foundation through teamwork, and to make progress during our time here at Grambling State University. Unfortunately, there are certain factors that are hindering us from reaching our goals. We have concerns with facilities, equipment, travel arraignments [sic], summer camp arraignments [sic], alumni association and friends of football funding, and our head coach. (Grambling State University Football, 2013, p. 1)

In an attempt to dissuade tensions and ensure that the team would be available to play the upcoming game against Jackson State University, Ragsdale, after five straight losses, was removed as interim head coach and replaced by defensive coordinator, Dennis Winston. This move, unfortunately, was unpersuasive to the college athletes. Only 22 of Grambling's 80 players reported to the charter buses scheduled to take the team to Jackson State (Anderson, 2013). Grambling State then had no choice but to forfeit the game against Jackson State. This forfeit cost the university up to \$20,000 in fines from the Southwestern Athletic Conference and other penalties that could total over \$300,000 (Anderson, 2013; Dumlao, 2013).

Grambling State's administration relied on former head coach, Doug Williams, alumni, and other friends of the program to help the team determine their next step and end the boycott. Williams promised that things would be done to upgrade the facilities (Schroeder, 2013). At a news conference on Monday afternoon (a week after the boycott began), player representative Naquan Smith announced the players' unanimous decision to end the boycott. The team returned to practice that same afternoon. Smith also noted that the players had no regrets about their choice to boycott. "It was tough, but we had to take a stand to get our point across. If we didn't take a stand, things would have been the same. We felt like for our voice to be heard [it required] what's going on now" (Schroeder, 2013, p. 3).

The national attention received by this boycott helped lead to significant turnover within the athletic department and with university administration. This protest brought attention to the problems facing the university with the new athletic director, Patricia Cage-Bibbs, placing a high priority on mending relationships (Schroeder, 2014). Budget woes still continued to be a problem in the aftermath, but all groups showed a willingness to work together and an understanding of the players' concerns. Initially, this boycott was treated as a special situation motivated by the circumstances at Grambling. It would not be long before another group of college athletes chose to use their voice to highlight problems and inequities in their environment.

University of Missouri. The actions leading to a boycott by the football team at the University of Missouri in November 2015 stems from student protests on campus concerning what many believed to be a systemic problem with race. The roots of the university's race-related concerns date back to its founding. Missouri was recognized as a slave state until 1865, and a slave owner, James Rollins, founded the University of Missouri in 1839 (The Economist, 2016). Like many schools of this era, integration came as a result of a court ruling rather than a desire to increase racial diversity on campus.

The enrollment of African-American students at the University of Missouri came initially from a directive by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1939. Lloyd Gaines, denied admission to the University of Missouri law school, successfully sued the university arguing discrimination under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th amendment of the U.S. Constitution (*Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 1938). There was no law school provided to African-Americans by the state. The only higher education options at that time were those provided by Lincoln University, an institution with limited graduate course offerings. The Court concluded a state is entitled to

furnish substantially equal advantages to all residents, regardless of race (Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, 1938). Even though Lloyd Gaines was successful, his disappearance in 1939 effectively ended the discussion of integrating the university. The University of Missouri did not admit any African-American students until 1950 (University of Missouri, n.d.).

The student group leading the 2015 protests at the university took their name from the year integration first occurred: Concerned Student 1950. The group started after several Black students noted an undercurrent of racial tension on campus, which escalated after the shooting death of an unarmed teen, Michael Brown, by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer in 2014 (Crockett, Jr., 2015). At the start of the 2015-16 school year, a series of racially motivated incidents took place on campus including racial slurs being yelled at Black students on campus. Black students and faculty reported that these were not isolated incidents on campus. Dr. Frisby, a journalism professor at the University of Missouri, detailed an experience where spit and racial slurs were used while jogging on a road near campus (Peralta, 2015).

The university initially responded to these events and student/faculty concerns with a video posted by Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin. In this video, Chancellor Loftin condemned racism and racist attacks on campus while announcing plans to institute diversity training for job searches, a campus climate survey, and a new position – vice chancellor for inclusion, diversity and equity. Concerned Student 1950 viewed this response as insufficient, leading to organized protest efforts on campus. The group published a list of demands, highlighting their frustration with the administration and the lack of minority faculty and staff on campus (Resmovits, 2015).

As the group and students continued to feel that their voices were being ignored, more organized boycotts occurred on campus. Concerned Student 1950 organized a boycott of all University of Missouri merchandise, events, and dining services. A protest occurred at the football stadium prior to the Missouri-Mississippi State game on November 5th (Resmovits, 2015). Shortly after this protest, African-American football players at the university joined the fight with a statement posted on Twitter including a picture of more than 30 football players linking arms with a graduate student, Jonathan Butler, who was engaged in a related hunger strike.

The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe ‘injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ We will no longer participate in any football related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students’ experiences. We are United!!!! (Legion of Black Collegians, 2015)

African-American players at the University of Missouri during the 2015-16 season represented 60 of the 125 players on the team’s roster. It is unclear if all the African-American players supported the boycott since about half of the group was included in the photo accompanying the statement (Tracy & Southall, 2015). When these players refused to participate, speculation began as to whether this boycott would involve the entire team. Head coach, Gary Pinkel, responded on Twitter the next day with support for the striking players and indicated that the entire team would participate in the protest (Pinkel, 2015). The athletic department at the University of Missouri later released a statement from Pinkel and athletic director, Mack Rhodes, confirming a cessation of all football-related activity until Butler resumed eating (Mizzou Athletics as cited in Auerbach, 2015).

The game immediately affected by this boycott was against Brigham Young University (BYU) at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri. If the team boycott continued through game time, the school was required to pay \$1 million to BYU under the terms of the game contract (Tracy & Southall, 2015). This financial penalty increased pressure from multiple sources seeking a swift resolution to the problem. On Monday, November 9th, President Wolfe resigned; two days after the African-American football players posted their statement. Chancellor Loftin also resigned from his position to transition to a research development position (Belkin & Korn, 2015). After these resignations, Butler announced that he would end his hunger strike and the athletic department released a statement announcing the football team's return to its activities. That Saturday, the football athletes turned their activism victory into a victory on the field (Godfrey, 2015). Further, the quick turnaround after these college athletes used their voice for change highlights the amount of agency available to them through their position on campus.

While the University of Missouri was able to reach a conclusion before impacting scheduled games, unlike Grambling State, both protests show the power of college athletes on their individual campuses. As soon as the football team united to protest, each university was called into action because of the influence of athletics on campus. The amount of money involved in athletics and the notoriety achieved by popular sports like football gives college athletes a forum for their voice to impart change. These protests provide evidence that college athletes have the power to influence others, so why are more athletes not utilizing this power across all college campuses? The responses to these boycotts and the aftermath highlight why these powerful college athletes may hesitate to speak out on social issues and what can be done to provide support.

Results

What Happens Next: Understanding Protest Motivations and How to Respond

What makes these two cases stand out is that these boycotts and collective stances were not about college athletes seeking financial compensation beyond a scholarship for their hard work. These cases were about issues that should be fundamentally expected and are more critical to athlete well-being than the popular debates regarding college athlete athletic compensation. Grambling State University athletes were fighting on matters of health and safety that directly affected them and their ability to participate in their sport. They were fighting for the removal of mold and mildew health hazards, and proper ventilation systems that should be immediately rectified. On the other hand, the athletes at the University of Missouri focused on improving race relations on campus by standing in support of a graduate student on a related hunger strike.

While these boycotts focused on creating change, the reaction to these efforts included some initial support and subsequent backlash as the impact of athlete activism faded over time. Grambling State players were originally lauded for their decision to stand up and address these issues. However, the significant financial concerns facing the university did not go away overnight and some blamed the team for lower enrollment the next fall, which included 300 fewer incoming freshmen than the school's average. There were other financial considerations after changes were made to the Grambling State athletic facilities (including replacing the weight room floor and remodeling the locker room) and Jackson State claimed \$600,000 in damages from the canceled game (Schroeder, 2014). Some Grambling State students wondered if the

boycott was worth it because these budget cuts and the subsequent financial penalties from the boycott impacted the entire campus (Anderson, 2013).

The University of Missouri's football players received similar support but more venomous negativity from the public. Former players posted statements on Twitter defending the university and accusing striking players of being irresponsible and ungrateful (Crawford, 2015; Miller, 2015). The real impact of the boycott beyond the resignation of key individuals within university administration remains to be seen. Similar enrollment declines also happened at the University of Missouri in the aftermath. The size of the university contributed to the shock factor with a projected decline of 2,600 students for 2016 (Keller, 2016). For those on campus, many of the same race-related concerns are still present, especially for those college athletes being blamed for the current state of affairs at the University of Missouri.

Professor Brooks, a former Associate Professor of Sociology and Black studies at the University of Missouri, highlighted the impact of race-related concerns and the connection Black football players had with the city's greater Black community during his time there. "While their core identity is as an athlete, they were awakened to the fact that yeah, they have privilege, but they're still a Black male" (Niesen, 2016, p. 5). A former player attending the BYU-Missouri game after the boycott noted that a lot of the difficulties associated with this issue revolve around fans forgetting that these athletes are people too.

There's something about the way we look at football players not as people. You look at them and you can't see their faces through the helmets. They're wearing pads that make them look bigger than they are. Football players tend to get dehumanized. People forget they're normal people that do everything they do. (Godfrey, 2015, p. 4)

The primary duty of these athletes is often focused on athletic excellence, not being an advocate for social change (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010) with a reliance on negative stereotyping related to athletic prowess and race (Harrison, 2001; Melendez, 2008). These assumptions of excellence based on athletic ability put college athletes in a situation where they are seen as privileged, not as a vulnerable population (Gill, 2008). This focus on privilege turns public opinions against college athletes by those who see these protests as selfish and greedy.

As the general public deems that college athlete motivations are rooted in attention and greed, what these protests actually illustrate is a desire to establish minimal living conditions and social standards. If these same issues occurred involving child custody or the actions of a single parent, social workers would seek active involvement to improve conditions for the child. These college athletes are not children, but they should have similar advocates for their well-being. The general public should not use the entertainment that college athletes provide as a reason to deny or ignore their pleas for fundamental human rights.

Coaches and those connected to the university who could be this source of guidance and empathy have mixed motivations and intentions simply due to loyalty to the team and the athletic department. Mike Stoops, defensive coordinator at the University of Oklahoma, accused Charles Walker of quitting on his team after he opted to sit out the remainder of the season in the fall of 2016 (Vardeman, 2016). Walker, who sustained his second concussion in less than a year, decided to sit out and prepare for the NFL draft instead of risking the possibility of further injury in college. In tweets leading up to his decision to forgo the rest of his college career, Walker stated that, "When ur [sic] a parent, u [sic] make choices...and the choices you make are never

for u [sic]...always for them” (Walker as cited by Przybylo, 2016). Walker’s desire to provide for his family did not come up in Coach Stoops’ response to the public.

Quitting on your teammates is hard to take, as a coach, Mike Stoops said. ‘That’s everything we stand for - our commitment to one another and, for whatever reason, that wasn’t there for him. He thought this was a better avenue so you would have to ask him for those [answers]’. (Vardeman, 2016, p. 2)

The coaching staffs at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri exhibited similar mixed loyalties in the aftermath of the team boycotts. One Grambling State player said in September 2015 that “[the team does not] really talk about that” when questioned about the aftermath of the boycott (Faraudo, 2015, p. 1). Media coverage echoed the athletes’ silence once the boycott ended. There are few articles available that cover the incident beyond the initial period of the boycott. One article, in particular, focused on Jackson State preparing for their upcoming game with Grambling State with the boycott mentioned as an aside (Dumlao, 2014). After all the efforts to use their voices for change, these college athletes are silent again, which should prompt further questioning.

Ushering in this new era means there is more that can be done to provide support for college athletes who wish to speak out and use their voice. Instead of solely relying on athlete advisors, coaches, and athletic staff/administrators, social workers employed with the university and outside professionals are a key group with the qualifications to assist with these concerns. Social workers are there to help vulnerable, under-represented individuals on campus. They are trained to be advocates and to raise awareness about the issues individuals and groups experience. College athletes are a visible presence on campus; however, they largely go without representation of their needs and interests. Social workers must form partnerships with athletic departments as an inter-professional collaboration to promote the health and well-being of college athletes within their environment (Moore, 2016).

Discussion

In the years since the boycotts at Grambling State University and the University of Missouri, the impact of change seems short lived. These protests created national headline news and immediate change on campus, but there appears to be no long-term results. Grambling State still has financial difficulties, and facilities have not been fully improved (Anderson, 2013). Race relations at the University of Missouri, one year later, remain contentious after another incident involving racial slurs took place at a fraternity house on campus (Svrluga, 2016). The power of college athletes when they organize, especially as a group, for activism is strong; however, their actions only led to temporary solutions and the resulting backlash might be enough to silence them in the future. Their silence in the aftermath even though the initial problems remain speaks to the need for an advocate.

Using Social Workers to Advocate for the College Athlete and their Concerns

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) mandates that social workers appreciate and emphasize social justice and advocacy. The required competency listed below indicates that every social worker should be able “to advocate for human rights at the individual

and system levels; and engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice” (CSWE, 2015, p. 8).

Social workers understand that every person regardless of position in society has fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations, and are knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights. Social workers understand strategies designed to eliminate oppressive structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are distributed equitably and that civil, political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural human rights are protected. (CSWE, 2015, p. 7)

In addition, the values set forth by the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) that guide the profession includes service, social justice, and dignity and worth of each person. Thus, social workers are trained to be advocates for social justice for all. Their position on campus allows them to advocate for college athletes while still being a neutral confidant.

Social workers are in a unique position to be advocates for college athletes and to respond in situations such as those described in the case studies (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2014). When these events occur on campus, social workers are trained to respond to the needs of the target population (college athletes in this case) and join in advocating for social change. Gill (2008) argues in favor of social work involvement in college athletics by theorizing that many people may not consider college athletes to be in need because of the assumed privilege on campus. Due to these assumptions, individuals are not intervening to assist them or advocating for services on their behalf. Social workers could be these advocates; linking college athletes with needed service providers and be a liaison between the athletes and their coaches (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Moore, 2016).

The public scrutiny faced by college athletes necessitates the need for a neutral advocate. They can and do face oppression and discrimination that often is ignored by those on the campus and in the surrounding community because of their athletic talent (Harrison, 2001; Melendez, 2008). Social work advocacy for college athletes needs to be done in order to contribute to the changes necessary for social justice and equality.

Social workers operate from an empowerment perspective that encourages individuals to use their voices for their concerns. The empowerment perspective underscores many interventions (Kirst-Ashman, 2014) and can be the approach needed to advocate in situations such as the case study examples by supporting the fourth wave of athlete activism and highlighting their power to affect change. The group voice becomes more impactful because college athletes realized they had power, which lead to immediate change.

Social movements such as those occurring at Grambling State and the University of Missouri highlight areas where social workers could intervene and illustrate the need for macro social work practitioners. Involvement with college athletes by social workers before and after crisis situations occur could lessen the tensions that may lead to boycotts. They do not need to feel oppressed or discriminated against to need an advocate. In fact, the more comfortable college athletes are with speaking about their concerns, the easier it will be to avoid problems like those that occurred at Grambling State and the University of Missouri. These issues and

concerns would not have escalated with clear lines of communication and everyone (including college athletes) being comfortable in communicating their concerns.

Social workers could advocate for individual athletes, or for an entire team or program (Dean & Rowan, 2014). College athletes could benefit from interventions provided by social workers, including mental health services when needed and by coordinating services within athletic departments (Gill, 2008; Gill, 2014; Moore, 2016). They can also attend to individual psychosocial issues being experienced by many college athletes (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; Gill, 2014) so that they can participate in advocacy for themselves and their teammates. To provide a more unified voice, social workers need to be aware of the issues surrounding college athletes on their campus and to support them in their advocacy efforts.

Future Directions

Given recent activism, future direction for social work research can address how to be an advocate in these situations. There needs to be a protocol to address social work involvement in college athlete activism. How this relationship will work and what it will look like is something to be determined by the athletic department, social workers, and the athletes they serve. There's evidence on the social workers' perspective for integrating social work into intercollegiate sports (Gill, 2014), but limited information about the college athlete perspective in utilizing these resources. It is difficult to be an advocate when the subject does not seek out help. College athletes will continue to advocate for their concerns (Tracy, 2016). This activism in the media after Grambling State's and the University of Missouri's boycotts focuses on individual protest rather than collective action. However, in December 2016, there was a collective protest conducted by the football team at the University of Minnesota. The players initiated a boycott of all football activity prior to their appearance in the 2016 Holiday Bowl to protest the suspensions of ten players. These suspensions were connected to a university hearing related to sexual assault allegations. (Bieler, 2016). The Minnesota football team was potentially motivated by the college athletes at Grambling State and the University of Missouri because they were encouraged to believe that coming together as a group with lots of national media attention is a way to spark immediate change. Social work involvement in their advocacy would have helped here because their goals were uninformed and misguided based on the situation at hand (Tracy & Borzi, 2016). Social workers could have mediated the complaints between the university and the athletes in a way that would address the problem without need for a boycott.

Conclusion

Social justice activism by college athletes and others on campus will not continue to be a rare occurrence. The lessons imparted by Grambling State and the University of Missouri stress the need to allow for communication with little conflict. The breakdown in communication and general concern related to negative consequences has ultimately silenced these athletes after they used their voices to impart change. Social work can bridge the gap between the college athlete, the athletic department, and the general public to raise awareness and prevent the negativity associated with those who view college athlete privilege without seeing their concerns.

Social workers on campus need to be more involved in athletic departments through collaboration or providing a point person to provide services at both the micro (such as providing counseling) and macro (such as linking athletes to needed resources) levels. Social work

education for college athletes and the athletic department can raise awareness of challenges that both sides may face (Gill, 2014). This would be beneficial for all parties involved to better support college athletes to use their power to advocate for change.

Additionally, social workers should not be afraid to initiate action and empower college athletes when they witness acts of discrimination or oppression. The focus should not be advocating on their behalf, but providing the assistance and resources needed for college athletes to be voices for their own concerns. What can be done to improve their mental well-being to allow them to be advocates for change instead of fearful of the potential consequences?

This effort is not limited to working with social work departments on campus or social work representatives within the athletic department. It may not be in the budget to add new staff positions at many universities. There can be a focus on collaboration or providing a contact person instead of a staffing position. For example, senior woman administrators, faculty athletic representatives and athlete support staff members can be trained to advocate as a social worker would in this situation. Building training programs for these individuals to consider the impact of social work and social justice provides a link between two areas on campus that are often disconnected but should collaborate. These bridge programs will assist those who work directly with college athletes in considering their needs beyond sport as well as providing resources to encourage college athletes to speak for their own concerns.

It only makes sense to utilize the resources social work provides for college athletes or to train people in athletics on how to manage the changing times. Athletics and this type of representation can be used as a service opportunity for social workers employed as faculty on campus. But athletic departments have to be open to this new advocacy and social workers must be prepared to meet resistance within the closed nature of athletics. Advocating for and creating real change will take time; however, the motivations of college athletes show that administrators, faculty, and the general public can and should consider their voices beyond the playing field. College athletes can use their position for change, not only when situations are dire, but with daily efforts to improve life on campus.

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