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## THE MADDENING SIDE OF MARCH MADNESS: A Q&A WITH NEPC FELLOW SHAUN HARPER



As basketball fans tune into *March Madness* this week, they may be unaware that there is a distressing side to the seemingly innocent American pastime of office pools and NCAA brackets: the disproportionately low graduation rates of Black athletes who compete in this high-profile tournament. These students are graduating at lower rates than just about every other comparable group at these schools, including other student athletes, Black male undergraduates overall, and undergraduate students overall.

Even as they earn billions for their universities, these student-athletes are often failed in the classroom by the very institutions they represent on the court. Given that **only 1.2 percent** of NCAA Division I male basketball players are drafted into the NBA, the vast majority will find themselves relying on their degrees, not their dunk shots. In a series of reports entitled *Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I College Sports*, NEPC Fellow Shaun Harper has been examining this issue, detailing the academic realities behind the big business of college sports. Harper is the Provost Professor of Education and Business at the University of Southern California, the Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership, the executive director of the *USC Race and Equity Center*, and chair of the USC Provost Oversight Committee for Athletic Academic Affairs. His 12 books include *Scandals in College Sports* (2017). In the Q&A below, Professor Harper explains the statistics that you won't see on *theScore*, shares recommendations for reducing racial inequities in college sports, and provides context on the recent scandal in college admissions offices and athletics departments.

**Q: A huge scandal just broke involving admissions offices and athletics departments at several elite universities. What are the implications for Black male student-athletes, the focal population in your 2018 racial inequities in college sports report?**

**A:** *At this point, it is no secret that universities with big-time sports programs often enroll athletically talented student-athletes whose high school grades and standardized test scores would not have qualified them for admission. A disproportionately high number of them are Black men who earn billions of dollars for their institutions, athletic conferences, and the NCAA by playing on football and basketball teams. To gain access to highly selective universities via special admission processes for athletes, Black men must be extraordinarily talented. That is, they must be actual student-athletes with actual records of extraordinary athletic accomplishments. That was not the case for the wealthy, mostly White children who profited from the recent scam. They took advantage of special admission processes, though they were not student-athletes. This, as I see it, is a demonstration of White privilege. Black men would not be afforded access to universities in this way without serious proof of their athletic deservingness. To be sure, I do not think any one – Black, White, rich, or poor – should be admitted to any university on the basis of anything other than demonstrated academic talent or sufficient evidence of academic promise.*

**Q:** **In the 2018 edition of *Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I College Sports*, you highlight 14 schools that have seen increases, as well as others that have seen decreases in the graduation rates of Black male athletes. What, if any, positive lessons can be learned from schools that have experienced increases? What, if any, cautionary tales can you identify from schools that have experienced decreases?**

**A:** *Those 14 universities show us that positive change is possible. All but two of them are public, which I think is good. One of the two private institutions is the University of Southern California, where I am a professor, which I also think is good. One noteworthy thing about their gains: Many had pathetically low graduation rates in 2016; while their 2018 rates were higher, they were still much lower than the average rates for student-athletes overall, Black undergraduate men overall, and undergraduate students overall in the Power 5 Conferences. We should also make sure these universities did not somehow cheat to manufacture these gains. As documented in my 2017 book, *Scandals in College Sports*, athletics departments across the nation have repeatedly participated in academic fraud.*

*For universities that experienced decreases, I obviously think they are going in the wrong direction. I want them to graduate Black male student-athletes at higher rates. And as noted in the report, if they sustain decreases and inequities year after year, there should be a policy prohibiting them from playing in bowl games, NCAA basketball tournaments, the College World Series, and other championship contests.*

**Q:** **Your 2016 report finds that Black female athletes graduate at higher rates than other student athletes, although their graduation rates do lag behind those of undergraduate non-athletes at their schools. Why do you think we see relatively better results for Black female athletes?**

**A:** *Money. Because women's sports typically do not generate nearly as much revenue via ticket sales, television contracts, sponsorships, and donations as do football and men's basketball teams, the pressure to prioritize winning games over academic achievement is*

*considerably lower for women student-athletes. Also, coaches and athletics department administrators are less likely to target and admit women student-athletes who are under-prepared for the rigors of college-level work. Those recruits have to be relatively accomplished both athletically and academically, whereas Black men are oftentimes admitted to universities in the Power 5 simply because of their athletic prowess.*

**Q: At D-1 schools, you find that 55 percent of Black male athletes graduate within six years. This rate is lower than rates for all student athletes at these schools (69 percent); Black male undergraduates overall at these schools (60 percent); and undergraduate students overall at these schools (76 percent). However, it is still higher than the overall national rate at which full-time, first-time Black male college students receive bachelor's degrees within six years, from the first four-year institution attended (35 percent). To what extent, if any, are D-1 schools providing services for their athletes that might benefit Black male students overall?**

*A: The problem with the 35 percent completion stat is that it reflects all four-year institutions, including those that are relatively open access. This reminds me of a claim the NCAA repeatedly makes in television commercials and elsewhere: Black male student-athletes at Division I institutions graduate at rates higher than Black men in the general student body. In response, I note the following on page 6 of my report:*

*This is true across the entire division, but not for the five conferences whose member institutions routinely win football and basketball championships, play in multimillion-dollar bowl games and the annual basketball championship tournament, and produce the largest share of Heisman trophy winners.*

*In this same way, graduation rates for undergraduate students overall at these 65 universities are much higher than they are for undergraduate students overall attending all four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States. Hence, the comparative advantage here is attributable to selectivity, not to resources athletics departments offer.*

**Q: You conclude your report with recommendations for improving racial equity in college sports. Are there one or two of those recommendations that you want to highlight here? Are any of these recommendations ones that, if implemented, you would also recommend as benefiting the broader group of Black college students who are not athletes?**

*A: My favorite is the one I referenced earlier: Teams that sustain racial inequities should not be rewarded with opportunities to play for NCAA championships. Former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan advocated this nearly a decade ago, but it ultimately was not actualized in policy. As I noted in the report, such a policy would demand data disaggregation. That is, attention must be paid not only to overall team rates, but also racial trends within teams.*

*My second favorite recommendation is the one about college admission officers doing more of what coaches do to recruit talented Black male high school students. I note on page 16*

of the report:

*A coach does not wait for high school students to express interest in playing for the university – he and his staff scout talent, establish collaborative partnerships with high school coaches, spend time cultivating one-on-one relationships with recruits, visit homes to talk with parents and families, host special visit days for student-athletes whom they wish to recruit, and search far and wide for the most talented prospects (as opposed to recruiting from a small number of high schools)...[I am] convinced that if admission officers expended as much effort as coaches, they would successfully recruit more Black male students who are not athletes.*

**Q: What, if anything, can fans do to encourage schools to make changes that will benefit Black male athletes?**

*A: I am a fan and a huge supporter of college student-athletes. Despite my critiques, I am not a hater of intercollegiate athletics. I just want coaches, athletics administrators, and others who are involved in the enterprise to act with uncompromising integrity, to more effectively serve the educational needs of student-athletes, and to play a more serious role in advancing the educational mission of universities. I want other fans to join me in articulating these same expectations and calling for greater transparency, accountability, and evidence that Black male student-athletes and their teammates are being served well by their athletics departments. I recently watched *Student Athlete*, a powerful HBO Sports documentary. I think all fans should watch this film, then use their platforms to raise public consciousness and demand change in response to the alarming issues documented therein.*

## NEPC Resources on Higher Education

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