

# 'I Think. I Play. Therefore, I Am:' How Precollege Experiences, Intersecting Identities, and College Microsystems Impact Belonging and Academic Self-Efficacy for Black Women's Basketball College Athletes at PWIs

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## Abstract

Recent media attention has focused on the athletic talent displayed by National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) women's basketball college athletes on a national stage. Less attention has been focused on their academic experiences at the institutional level, particularly Black women's basketball college athletes (BWBCAs) playing at NCAA DI predominantly White institutions (PWIs) who leverage capital to achieve academic and athletic success while facing stereotypes and lacking support for their intersecting identities. Using the Bioecological Model of Human Development and Community Cultural Wealth as guiding frameworks, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 former BWBCAs to explore how their precollege experiences, intersecting identities, and relationships in their college microsystems influenced their academic self-efficacy and belonging. Findings revealed four primary influences on the BWBCAs' experiences: 1) salience of precollege academic identity, 2) hypervisibility of intersecting identities, 3) holistic interactions in BWBCAs' microsystems, and 4) coaching ethos. The findings have implications for enhancing the academic experiences of all Black women college athletes at PWIs.

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For decades, the behemoth that is National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) college sports has enjoyed financial success off the sweat and sacrifice of college athletes. In the profit-generating sports of NCAA football and men's basketball, most of these athletes are Black, recruited to play at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Harper, 2018). Black women's basketball college athletes (BWBCAs) also contribute to the wealth and power of the college sports system through million-dollar media deals (Despite Growing Ratings, 2024), yet their unique experiences tend to be silenced both in the media (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016) and at the institutions that recruited them (Bruening et al., 2005).

The college sports system has set a low bar for Black athletes, leading to a lack of support for their academic success and college outcomes (Rubin, 2016). Although BWBCAs achieve academically in college, they face multiple barriers to their holistic development and successful academic outcomes because of their intersecting identities (Bernhard, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2023; Ofoegbu, 2025a; Simien et al., 2019). Unlike their male counterparts, BWBCAs must "contend with the dual effects of racism and sexism" (Bernhard, 2014, p. 68). Overcoming these barriers often requires support from people in their environment, such as family members, faculty, Black coaches and advisors, and teammates (Bernhard, 2014; Ofoegbu, 2025a; Ojemaye et al., 2024). These relationships can provide essential capital to help BWBCAs stand up against challenges and achieve their academic and career goals and a sense of belonging (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Ofoegbu et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to use an anti-deficit lens to understand how BWBCAs' precollege experiences, intersecting identities and the relationships they develop in their microsystems at PWIs shape their academic self-efficacy and belonging through the challenges they encounter and capital they develop to persist and succeed. Understanding the macro- and micro-level influences on BWBCAs' academic experiences is essential in a commercialized sports industry that places revenue-generation and wins ahead of personal and academic development (Cooper et al., 2017b; Ojemaye et al., 2024). Scant research has examined the impact of college sports participation on the BWBCA population (Bernhard, 2014; Cooper et al., 2020). Therefore, the literature review reflects the experiences of the broader Black women college athlete (BWCA) population by exploring their precollege experiences, academic experiences, intersecting identities, sense of belonging, relationships in their microsystems, and the commercialization of college sports. The current study contributes to existing research by understanding the influence of salient identities and experiences before college on academic self-efficacy and belonging of BWBCAs through an anti-deficit lens. The study seeks to answer the following research questions about former BWBCAs at PWIs:

**R1:** How do BWBCAs' precollege experiences, intersecting identities and relationships in their microsystems shape their academic self-efficacy and belonging?

**R2:** How do BWBCAs leverage cultural wealth to succeed academically?

## Literature Review

### Precollege Experiences

The BWCA college experience often hinges on the gendered socialization process that occurs during childhood, as young Black women are encouraged by families and their communities to develop their academic identities (Cooper et al., 2016, 2017b) more so than Black males, who are pushed to develop their athletic identities by the media, Black culture, and their communities (Howe, 2020). However, the families of Black women also value athletic participation for its social development and educational opportunities more highly than families of White women (Hanks, 1979).

The salience of their academic and athletic identities can cause BWCAs to pursue different goals when choosing where to attend college, as some are driven by their desire for cultural and racial belonging to attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU; Cooper & Newton, 2021); others are encouraged to use athletic skill to earn a scholarship at a PWI (Cooper & Jackson, 2019); some are motivated by their desire to be the first in their family to earn a college degree (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Sato et al., 2017); and others pursue institutions that can meet their high academic expectations (Cooper et al., 2016, 2017b, 2020). When BWCAs possess salient athletic identities that dictate their decisions for attending college, they have diminished expectations for their educational outcomes (Cooper & Jackson, 2019) that are further suppressed by the institutions that recruit them (Rubin, 2016). Lower academic expectations are more pronounced for BWCAs in NCAA DI high-profile sports like women's basketball (Cooper et al., 2020). Black women college athletes' precollege experiences provide them with familial, navigational, and aspirational capital to guide their decisions related to their pursuit of a college degree (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 2017b; Ofoegbu et al., 2022).

### Academic Experiences

Black women college athletes attend college with varying levels of academic preparation, as some are recruited from underserved high schools, leaving them underprepared for the academic rigor of the PWI and requiring more academic support (Sato et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 1997). Other BWCAs feel academically prepared for college because of challenging high school experiences that give them the necessary academic skills and preparation to succeed (Cooper et al., 2016). When BWCAs are underprepared, the consistent stereotypes about their academic abilities and the cultural incongruity they experience at their PWIs result in more significant academic challenges and set them up for failure (Sato et al., 2017; Withycombe, 2011). Academic support staff exacerbate these challenges by encouraging online courses that accommodate athletic schedules even though the BWCAs prefer traditional classroom experiences (Sato et al., 2017). The lack of proper support for BWCAs negatively impacts GPAs, time-to-degree, and graduation rates when compared to their White counterparts (Cooper et al., 2020; Rubin, 2016).

Regardless of their goals before college, once BWCAs are immersed in the realities of being a student-athlete, they realize how sport participation limits other opportunities to get involved on campus (Cooper et al., 2017b; Ojemaye et al., 2024), giving them “tunnel vision” about their role in athletics (Cooper & Jackson, 2019, p. 347). Time constraints from being a DI athlete or lack of support by coaches restrict BWCAs’ abilities to participate in holistic development activities such as internships (Ojemaye et al., 2024) or “to prepare herself psychosocially and cognitively for her future beyond sports” (Howard-Hamilton, 1993, p. 155). This particularly damages BWCAs with higher athletic identity salience, who may feel less motivated to invest the extra energy to succeed academically (Cooper & Jackson, 2019). However, BWCAs also gain other benefits from their athletic participation that non-athletes do not, such as higher overall satisfaction and social skills (Sellers et al., 1997). When BWCAs face stereotypes in the classroom or lack the support needed to succeed, many will leverage resistance (Ofogebu et al., 2022) and familial capital to persist (Cooper et al., 2017b).

### **Intersecting Identities and Sense of Belonging**

Black women college athletes’ intersecting identities of athlete status, race, and gender subject them to numerous stereotypes that disregard their academic strengths and challenge their abilities to find community at a PWI (Carter-Francique, 2020; Cooper et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2023; Ojemaye et al., 2024). The intersection of race and gender cannot be overlooked when exploring BWCAs’ experiences at PWIs because it helps to explain “the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140) on the court and in the classroom. Some BWCAs feel marginalized by teammates and other athletes, struggling to find peer mentors to help them navigate the rigors of their athletic and academic schedules (Sato et al., 2017). Others experience negative interactions with faculty who hold stereotypical beliefs about their abilities, lowering their academic sense of belonging (Sato et al., 2017). Consistent encounters with gender and racial stereotypes lower belonging for some BWCAs at PWIs (Carter-Francique, 2018).

A sense of belonging is essential for college students, especially those from marginalized populations like BWCAs who possess multiple overlapping identities (Strayhorn, 2019). Although DI college athletes report a higher sense of belonging than non-athletes, college athletes of color and those with higher athletic identity salience feel less belonging (Gayles et al., 2018). Consistent gender and racial stereotypes negatively impact BWCAs’ experiences at PWIs by being marginalized, leading to isolation and heightened anxiety (Ojemaye et al., 2024), as well as a lower sense of belonging (Carter-Francique, 2018). Being able to integrate successfully into the university positively impacts their academic performance, yet BWCAs often face hostile campus climates (Cooper et al., 2020; Sellers et al., 1997). When they feel isolated at their PWIs, BWCAs may rely on head coaches or academic advisors for support (Carter-Francique, 2014).

Despite facing numerous challenges because of their identities, some BWCAs find belonging among their teammates and show persistence to succeed athletically

and academically (Withycombe, 2011). Institutions can foster a sense of belonging and empower BWCAAs to succeed by hiring Black women administrators who share the BWCAAs’ identities (Ojemaye et al., 2024) and creating an inclusive culture that supports their academic, identity, and career development (Carter-Francique, 2018). Providing access to counter spaces such as affinity groups or Black fraternities can help develop BWCAAs at PWIs and give them a sense of community outside of athletics (Carter-Francique, 2014). Sister circles also provide a space for BWCAAs to challenge oppressive environments and find support from same-race peers at PWIs by discussing sensitive issues that are relevant to their experiences (Ferguson, 2023). These spaces become a source of navigational, social, and resistance capital that help BWCAAs persist through challenges and succeed when faced with oppression (Yosso, 2005).

### **Relationships in BWCAAs’ Microsystems**

Black women college athletes comprise only 6% of all athletes at DI institutions (NCAA demographics database, n.d.), so their successful outcomes at PWIs may depend on people in their microsystems to help them find community by supporting their racial identity (Bernhard, 2014; Ojemaye et al., 2024). The head coach serves as one of the critical systems in the BWCA experience (Bruening et al., 2005; Carter & Hart, 2010) due to the relationships fostered through the recruitment process and the more than 40 hours per week that athletes devote to their sport (Comeaux, 2018). Coaches may act as mentors who support BWCAAs’ holistic development, or they may use their power to hinder their academic development through control, micro-aggressions, and favoritism toward White players (Ofoegbu, 2025a). When BWCAAs are not supported by their coaches, they feel their voices are silenced (Bruening et al., 2005), leading to isolation and anxiety, even among their own teams (Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Getting BWCAAs to commit to a PWI is sometimes the job of a Black assistant coach, who is often the only Black coach on the staff (Bernhard, 2014). Black women college athletes will look to their Black assistant coaches for guidance because they feel they are more invested in their athletic and academic success than their White head coaches (Ofoegbu, 2025a). Having Black coaches or academic advisors who understand BWCAAs’ unique experiences (Carter & Hart, 2010), care about their non-athletic interests, and encourage them to pursue their long-term academic and career goals contributes to BWCAAs’ cultural and academic development (Ofoegbu, 2022; Ojemaye et al., 2024). However, despite BWCAAs comprising more than 43% of women’s basketball teams, less than 12% of head basketball coaches are Black women (Simien et al., 2019). Even if BWCAAs do not develop relationships with their Black coaches, they desire more diversity on their coaching staff because they find comfort in seeing people who look like them (Bernhard, 2014; Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Black women college athletes at PWIs can achieve academic self-efficacy, the belief they can succeed in the classroom (Bandura, 1977), by developing nurturing relationships with faculty (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Sato et al., 2017), academic advisors (Ofoegbu, 2022), and mentors (Bimper, 2017) who are interested in devel-

oping their potential outside of athletics (Ofoegbu et al., 2022). When professors empathize with BWCA's athletic schedules and invest in their academic success, it positively influences their academic experience (Carter-Francique et al., 2015). Some athletic programs encourage BWCA's to interact with faculty, which helps them develop social capital (Cooper et al., 2017b). Mentoring programs can contribute to successful academic and career outcomes by empowering BWCA's to self-advocate, instilling self-confidence, providing social capital (Bimper, 2017), and matching them with people who understand their unique needs related to their intersecting identities (Carter & Hart, 2010). Although they benefit from Black faculty and staff mentors, a lack of diversity at PWIs makes it challenging for BWCA's to get the development they deserve (Carter-Francique, 2014). However, research highlights how BWCA's leverage various forms of capital to achieve positive academic outcomes within environments where they may feel marginalized (Cooper et al., 2017b).

### **Commercialization of College Sports**

To understand the experiences of DI athletes, it is essential to explore the complexities of the college sports system within which they compete. Division I conferences are the most competitive and lucrative of the three divisions in the NCAA, earning almost \$18 billion in 2022 (Division I Athletics Finances, 2023). College sports' commercial appeal has led to billion-dollar media deals to broadcast the men's basketball tournament (NCAA Records, 2024) and \$115 million in annual revenue for the women's basketball tournament (Despite Growing Ratings, 2024). Until recently, NCAA amateurism policies restricted athletes from receiving the revenue they generated from their athletic performance, so all the profits went to conferences, institutions, and coaching salaries (Southall & Weiler, 2014), with DI coaches earning \$3.5 billion in 2022 (Division I Athletics Finances, 2023).

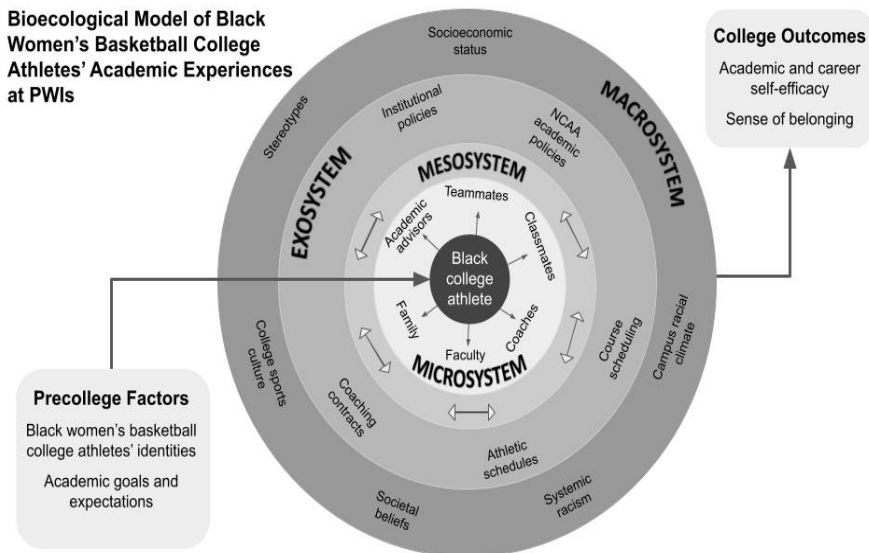
The DI sports culture has been criticized for committing a "moral injury" by exploiting college athletes for their athletic skills, particularly because most athletes on the profit-generating teams of basketball and football are Black (The Drake Group, 2021, p. 54). Black women college athletes experience racial discrimination like their male counterparts, but they also experience sexism, harassment, assault, and unequal treatment related to their intersecting gender and racial identities, which impact mental health (The Drake Group, 2021). Mental health issues are exacerbated by the pressure to balance academic and athletic schedules in an environment that emphasizes athletic success over personal goals (Ojemaye et al., 2024). The revenue-driven goals of big-time college athletic programs grant head coaches and athletic administrators (most of whom are White) control over their recruited athletes (Ofoegbu, 2025a) by limiting their engagement in educationally purposeful activities (Comeaux, 2013). National Collegiate Athletic Association graduation rate data showing BWCA's graduate at lower rates than their White peers highlights BWCA's challenges in achieving their academic outcomes (Rubin, 2016; Simien et al., 2019) and represents a form of "institutional neglect" (Cooper & Jackson, 2019, p. 349).

## Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the academic experiences of BWBCAs at PWIs, the current study draws upon two theories: the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2005). As shown in Figure 1 and discussed in greater detail below, these theories help explain how BWBCAs' intersecting identities and precollege backgrounds influence relationships at PWIs and provide them with cultural wealth that helps them navigate and make sense of these relationships to achieve academic self-efficacy and belonging.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



*Note:* Adopted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory

### **Bioecological Model of Human Development**

Researching BWBCAs' experiences at PWIs requires understanding how different systems interact to impact their holistic development. Building off Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecology of Human Development theory, the revised Bioecological Model of Human Development provides a framework for understanding the development of the student-athlete through the four properties of process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The new model deviates from the previous model by focusing more on processes than environment and highlighting the influential role person characteristics play in the ongoing interactions that take place between the person and environment. Characteristics such as race, gender, and

belief systems shape interactions in either disruptive or generative ways, ultimately impacting the person's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This distinction from the previous model is vital for researching BWBCAs at PWIs because it explains how intersecting identities, such as race and gender, and belief systems before college influence interactions with faculty, coaches, teammates, classmates, athletic staff, and others in the campus community.

Ecological Systems Theory has been applied in the college sports context to understand how race influences Black athletes' perceptions of their macrosystems (Cooper et al., 2017a; Melendez, 2008) and microsystems (Cooper et al., 2017a). Black athletes perceive their campus climate less positively than White college athletes (Cooper et al., 2017a) because they experience cultural incongruity and overt acts of racism on campus and in surrounding communities (Melendez, 2008). At the microsystem level, athlete status may influence Black college athletes more positively than White college athletes concerning social interactions with different-race individuals on campus (Cooper et al., 2017a). Although the above-referenced studies focus on Black male athletes, they demonstrate the effectiveness of using Ecological Systems Theory to understand how BWBCAs navigate relationships in their microsystems.

Building off Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) Bioecological Model, Ofoegbu (2025) developed a Black feminist framework of interpersonal exploitation that specifically addresses system-level impacts within college sports on BWBCAs. The microsystem level encompasses the stereotypes and microaggressions many BWBCAs face in their interactions with coaches, teammates, and faculty. The mesosystem reflects campus culture and athletic department practices that may dehumanize BWBCAs who do not conform to cultural norms (Ofoegbu, 2025b). Black women college athletes are also subjected to gendered and racist policies at the NCAA level that exploit them for their athletic talent at PWIs, leaving them isolated and without a sense of belonging (Ofoegbu, 2025b). These policies change over time, representing the chronosystem-level impact on BWBCAs' experiences (Ofoegbu, 2025b).

### ***Community Cultural Wealth***

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework draws upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) to confront implicit racism and suggests people of color possess six types of capital that help them persist and succeed when facing oppression (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital includes succeeding within institutions not designed to support people of color, such as PWIs, and employing strategies to help them thrive within hostile racial climates (Ofoegbu et al., 2022). Students of color develop goals for their future with family members and use aspirational capital to overcome obstacles to achieve these goals and resistance capital to persist when facing oppression (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital provides the support and encouragement to persist at PWIs (Cooper et al., 2017b), while social capital provides the relationships, networks, and community resources BWBCAs draw upon for support (Yosso, 2005). The last form of capital, linguistic capital, refers to the skills gained by communicating in other languages besides English (Yosso, 2005).

Research on BWCAs highlights the capital they bring to their experiences at PWIs (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). Navigational capital often intersects with aspirational capital to shape BWCAs' decisions about majors, career choices, and interests to explore outside athletics (Ofoegbu et al., 2022), while familial capital provides emotional and financial support (Carter-Francique et al., 2015). Some BWCAs use resistance and familial capital to help them persist when faced with adverse experiences by excelling academically to disprove stereotypes (Cooper et al., 2017b, 2020; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). Black women college athletes develop social capital at PWIs through faculty relationships (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Cooper et al., 2017b) or mentors who help them navigate cultural norms, develop beneficial relationships, and promote holistic development (Bimper, 2017).

## Method

### Research Design

This study uses a basic qualitative research approach to explore academic experiences and outcomes of BWBCAs at PWIs (Merriam, 2014). A basic qualitative study allows researchers to understand a phenomenon as participants interpret and construct meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2014). Qualitative studies are distinct from quantitative studies because “the researcher is the instrument” for collecting data, whether through interviews, observation, or document analysis (Tracy, 2020, p. 19). Researchers conducting basic qualitative studies often perform inductive data analysis, whereby themes are constructed and data are constantly compared among participants, which is presented through detailed descriptions in the findings (Merriam, 2014).

### Participants

Basic qualitative studies typically employ purposeful sampling because the participants need to be familiar with the topic under exploration (Merriam, 2014). We began the selection procedure by contacting people in our networks to help disseminate the study recruitment flyer. As a former sports management instructor and DI administrator, the primary researcher emailed former students and athletes about participating in the study. The second researcher is a former BWBCA whose network included other former DI basketball players.

Selection criteria included former BWBCAs who earned a college degree and played at a DI PWI. Since this study explored how BWBCAs interpret how participating in DI basketball influenced their college experience and outcomes, it was necessary to interview former BWBCAs who could reflect retrospectively on their lived experiences at PWIs. Retrospective methods can strengthen qualitative research, mainly when used with interpretivist methods (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). Research on the Black college athlete experience has used retrospective methods with qualitative methods to understand the participants' meaning-making behind their lived experiences and how that shaped their present-day outcomes (Hogan, 2024). We did

not specify a maximum time since graduation, so the final sample included 10 former BWBCAs aged 25-35 (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>First Gen?</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>College Major</i>	<i>Grad School?</i>	<i>Current Job</i>
Aliyah	27	Yes	Diverse public	Psychology	No	Law Enforcement
Kianna	35	No	Diverse public	Social Sciences	Yes	Equity Strategist
Laila	33	No	Private PWI	Labor Relations, Communication	Yes	HR Business Partner
Monique	26	No	Private PWI	Geology	Yes	EPA Contractor
Simone	27	No	Private PWI	Health and Rehab Sciences	Yes	Healthcare Consultant
Sydney	25	Yes	Diverse public	Liberal Studies	No	Professional Athlete
Thor	28	No	Private PWI	Political Science, Pre-Law	No	Paralegal Manager
Tiffany	26	No	Private PWI	Health Science	Yes	Graduate Student
TJ	25	No	Private PWI	Business and Entrepreneurship	No	Account Coordinator
Yasmin	31	Yes	Private PWI	Sociology	Yes	Professional Athlete

## Data Collection

Before starting data collection, the researchers received IRB approval from the primary researcher's institution. An online demographic survey was administered to potential interview participants through Qualtrics, which asked questions about personal characteristics and athletic and academic background to confirm the participants met the study criteria. Once participants signed the online consent form, Zoom interviews were scheduled with one or both researchers present. In-depth one-on-one interviews are the most common data collection tools in qualitative research because

the verbal and nonverbal communication provides valuable insight into the meaning being constructed by the participants (Tracy, 2020).

Interviews lasted 60-75 minutes and followed an interview guide that explored how participants’ identities and experiences with athletics, racial climate, and college experience influenced their academic experience at PWIs. The first set of questions explored their athletic experience, including their relationships with teammates and coaches (e.g., How would you describe your relationship with your coaches?). The second set of questions examined their academic experiences and the resources available to them (e.g., How do you feel participating in sports impacted your academics?). The next set of questions explored their college experience outside of athletics, including opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (e.g., What was your college experience beyond athletics and the classroom?). Additional questions related to their salient identities (e.g., How did your intersecting identities impact your experiences athletically [coaches/teammates], academically, and socially?). A few questions related to their precollege experiences and goals (e.g., Did you meet your expectations when you started in college for how you were going to do academically?). A final set of questions explored the factors impacting their sense of belonging (e.g., What was your perception of the campus racial climate, and how did that affect your sense of belonging?).

## Data Analysis

Data analysis in basic qualitative studies occurs simultaneously with data collection to help guide the direction of subsequent interviews (Merriam, 2014). The process starts inductively to see what information is discovered during the interviews but then becomes more deductive as researchers begin to see how to fit new data into existing categories they created (Merriam, 2014). The analytic process involves four steps: open coding, axial coding, category construction, and data sorting (Merriam, 2014). This process continues for each interview until reaching data saturation.

Before starting data analysis, we manually transcribed the interviews verbatim and shared with participants to confirm data accuracy. We then began the first analytical step of open coding, a process that involved identifying relevant words or phrases in the transcript that relate to the research questions (Merriam, 2014). Examples of codes included “favoritism,” “academic support,” and “stereotypes.” These codes were then condensed into categories that began to give meaning to the data, a process known as axial coding (Merriam, 2014). The initial categories included “relationship with coaches,” “faculty interactions,” and “perception of racial climate.”

Throughout data collection, we organized the codes by constructing categories or themes that represented patterns in the data (Merriam, 2014). As we progressed through data collection, we began to think deductively about how new information fit into the categories or buckets we created, often necessitating creating new categories or condensing others. This process led to the final analytical step of sorting the categories and data to identify commonalities and outliers relating to the BWBCAs’ academic experiences and outcomes. After re-reading transcripts and sorting through codes, we constructed a final set of categories or themes that became our summary

of findings. We shared a summary of the common themes with the participants to ensure they accurately interpreted their experiences. The final themes are presented below.

### **Positionality**

Since qualitative researchers are intimately involved in data collection, they must acknowledge potential biases or assumptions they bring to their research because of identities, backgrounds, and theoretical orientation (Merriam, 2014). The primary researcher is a middle-aged, White woman who was a PhD student at the time of data collection. She never played DI basketball, so she could not relate to the BWBCAs' experiences of playing at a PWI as athletes of color. However, as a former DI compliance coordinator and sports administration instructor, the primary researcher could empathize with the BWBCAs. Her positionality as a White woman conducting research on BWBCAs informed the type of research study and the methods used in the research.

To acknowledge potential biases from her background teaching BWBCAs, the primary researcher adopted an interpretive research paradigm that allowed her to display empathy for the BWBCAs by giving them the space to share their lived experiences without judgment, and then socially constructing an interpretation of their subjective experiences (Tracy, 2020). This paradigm aligns with the basic qualitative study that seeks to understand how participants construct meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2014). It was essential to practice reflexivity throughout the process to check for potential biases in the research questions, interviews, and data analysis (Tracy, 2020). Reflexivity involved being transparent not only about researcher positionality but also the reasons for the specific sample selection that included BWBCAs, the steps used in data collection, and a detailed explanation of how the data were interpreted in the findings and discussion.

The second researcher is a former BWBCA who could identify with the participants' lived experiences because she also played at a PWI and was close in age to most participants. Her shared background allowed the researchers to develop rapport with the participants during the interviews. Additionally, her experience as a BWBCA provided valuable insight that informed how the research questions were designed and the sample was selected to minimize potential biases. At the same time, she recognized sharing a background with participants could introduce assumptions about their experiences and bias in the research. This acknowledgment required her to be reflexive by taking notes during the interviews and data analysis (Tracy, 2020). She discussed these notes and her interpretation of the interviews with the primary researcher to mitigate potential bias.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be achieved through numerous strategies relating to reflexivity (described above), methodological rigor, researcher credibility, and paradigms (Patton, 1999). We demonstrated methodological rigor through negative case analysis in the presentation of the findings (Merriam, 2014).

This process of presenting outliers who diverged from the common themes is essential in qualitative research because it lends more credence to the original explanation of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2014). A second strategy is related to analyst triangulation, which we achieved by using two researchers to collect and analyze the data (Patton, 1999). Member checks are another vital step to ensure credibility in qualitative research because they allow the participants to confirm the transcripts and interpretations of the transcripts accurately reflect their experiences (Merriam, 2014). We emailed the participants a copy of the interview transcript immediately after the interview and received a confirmation email from all of them that the transcripts were accurate. After completing data analysis, we emailed a summary of findings to all participants to ensure our interpretation of their meaning-making accurately reflected their own interpretations. We also utilized theory triangulation by incorporating two theories into our guiding framework. The final strategy is related to research paradigms. Having an interpretive paradigm was essential for qualitative research on BWBCAs since our philosophical beliefs and the analytical method relied on participants sharing their lived experiences.

## Findings

Our study revealed four primary influences on the BWBCAs' belonging and academic self-efficacy: 1) salience of precollege academic identity, 2) hypervisibility of intersecting identities, 3) holistic interactions in BWBCAs' microsystems, and 4) coaching ethos. Each finding is represented by sub-themes that quantify participant responses and identify the outliers.

### **Salience of Precollege Academic Identity**

Black women college athletes are socialized at a young age by their families and Black culture to develop strong academic identities (Cooper et al., 2016) while also demonstrating their strength through athletic achievement (Howard-Hamilton, 1993). The high value placed on academics gives BWBCAs familial, navigational, and aspirational capital to pursue academic opportunities that will help them achieve their goals and succeed when facing obstacles (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). All 10 participants were encouraged by their families to achieve athletically, and they chose academic opportunities at PWIs where they could earn a college degree on a DI basketball scholarship.

#### ***High Academic Identity Salience***

Most participants ( $n=6$ ), like TJ, Laila, Simone, Tiffany, Thor, and Monique, reported starting college with a strong academic identity because of their commitment to succeeding both athletically and academically in college. Tiffany explained the priority on academics:

There's something to be said culturally in the Black community about what we value in young boys and young girls. I feel like girls, and you can see it, like across industries, that Black women are like outpacing Black men as

far as like getting higher education, and it's because those are the things that are like valued and pushed and like idealized ... at a young age for women, and for boys it's always like the athleticism.

These BWBCAs came from families where academic excellence was encouraged (Cooper et al., 2017b), so they used aspirational capital to choose a DI basketball institution that offered the best academic opportunity. Thor explained how she never regretted her decision academically:

Athletically, I wasn't sure I was at the right place. Academically, I knew I was right where I belonged. I felt encouraged. ... I knew that I love school and me succeeding academically and having the interactions I had, it kind of just affirmed that although athletically it may not have been what I wanted, academically it was meant to be.

The salience of the BWBCAs' academic identities influenced decisions about which institutions to attend, often conflicting with their athletic identities in college and resulting in lower-than-expected academic outcomes. The findings revealed five of the six participants with high academic identity salience did not meet their initial expectations for how they would perform academically. Simone came to college with a strong academic identity from a private high school, so she was not "too surprised by anything academically" but described basketball's impact on academics:

It started off a little bit rough actually, because I initially went to [university] with the mindset that I was gonna do the doctorate of physical therapy program. ... After I had already signed and started classes, ... I was told [by academic advisors] that I wouldn't be able to do that major because the time in which we would have to do like our clinical rotations and practicum, we would be in the heat of season. ... That put kind of like a sour taste in my mouth immediately. And then I pivoted because I was 18 and I had time. And so I ended up finding what I really wanted to do, which was study public health.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) Bioecological Model explains how strong belief systems about the value of an education influence BWBCAs' interactions with their environments at PWIs in positive ways that contribute to their academic development, despite facing athletic pressures that may challenge their development.

### ***Low Academic Identity Salience***

Four of the participants did not place a high priority on academics. Aliyah, Yasmin, Kianna, and Sydney entered college with low expectations because they did not have strong academic identities (Cooper et al., 2020), so their academic decisions before and during college were dictated by basketball and aspirational capital to earn a DI basketball scholarship. Kianna reflected on her decision to attend a PWI even though many HBCUs were recruiting her:

All of my family, except for me, attended [HBCU], ... but [HBCU] were also terrible at basketball at the time. I wish that their pitch would have been more about ... growing you as a woman. ... I wish I would have personally

had someone around me at 16, 17, 18 who had me focus a little more on the academics.

Sydney reported her academic experience as a “roller coaster,” but she was able to make it through with the help of supportive tutors. She described how aspirational capital to be “the first” motivated her to succeed despite not being a strong student:

Growing up I was never like a school person, like I hated being in school, but I knew like I couldn't play basketball if I didn't go to school. I definitely knew, like, I was going to be the first one in my family to graduate, ... first person in my school to be on scholarship. ... I'm the first for a lot of things. ... That really was just the goal for me.

When athletic identities are prioritized over academics, Yosso's (2005) CCW framework helps to explain how BWBCAs use aspirational capital to earn a degree. Supported by the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), these findings reflect the BWBCAs' ability to leverage the resources in their microsystems (i.e., advisors) and the social capital they gain as DI athletes to succeed in the classroom. The BWBCAs' experiences highlight their strengths in persisting and succeeding, regardless of the salience of their academic identities (Cooper et al., 2020).

### **Hypervisibility of Intersecting Identities**

A common theme among participants was how their intersecting identities of race, gender, and athlete status gave them hypervisibility at a PWI, which influenced classroom experiences, including relationships with faculty and classmates.

### ***The Negative Impact of Intersecting Identities***

Most participants ( $n=8$ ) believed their intersecting identities negatively impacted their college experiences because of persistent stereotypes from coaches, faculty, and students about their abilities. As a first-generation BWBCA, Aliyah felt she “only fit in with the basketball team,” and struggled to connect with her coaches, faculty, and classmates. Yasmin described the impact of her identities on her academic experience:

We came to the U.S. as refugees ... and we didn't really have an emphasis on education or sport. ... I wish I had better rapport with my professors. I wish that I was more vocal with the things that I was going through. ... I did not have a blueprint of what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to do it. It was already a miracle that I was there.

Yasmin's statement reflected her struggles to navigate academic requirements as a transfer student without support from coaches or advisors whose “focus is to just get, make sure everyone's eligible.” Her experience also reflects a broader challenge facing BWBCAs trying to navigate ethnic and cultural differences in addition to their racial, gender, and athletic identities. As first-generation college athletes, Aliyah and Yasmin struggled to develop their academic identities in an environment that prioritized athletics over academics, but their aspirational and familial capital helped them persist and achieve their goal of getting a college degree.

Tiffany used familial, navigational, and aspirational capital to maneuver the challenging experience of being a DI athlete and a pre-med student at a PWI. However, she recalled how her identity as a BWBCA made it challenging for her to develop social capital in the classroom:

I had a really hard time making friends outside of sports. ... in some of my, like, classes in my major, people have, like that idea of like, 'oh, like the athletes are just getting by, like they're not really paying attention, they're getting easy a's' ... There was the bias. ... Some of the athletes were like that ... I've been in class with some of the hockey guys, and yeah, some of them are like that, but I don't know, and I guess like if that's their experience, it's hard to be like, you can't make that judgment, but it's still frustrating to be on the other side of it.

Although she was pre-med and had a strong academic identity, Tiffany faced gendered academic stereotypes because of her athlete status since classmates attributed the "dumb jock" stereotype to male athletes at her school. Despite negative experiences with their intersecting identities, all the participants earned their college degrees by leveraging aspirational and other forms of capital (Yosso, 2005), even if it required transferring to a different school to get the support they needed.

### ***The Positive Impact of Intersecting Identities***

Only two participants believed their intersecting identities benefited their social and academic experiences. Thor explained:

I think it made it more fun. Okay. I mean, like being a Black female, first off, my opinion, it was easier than being Black male on campus. ... I think the Black males are trying to like earn the White guys' respect a lot of times, you see, whereas, especially me being like a Black female lesbian athlete, White girls thought I was so cool. The White guys thought I was so cool, and then like the Black people, girls, guys, thought I was cool. And so I think that kind of like worked to my advantage in a sense, because they didn't really know how to categorize me.

Thor's comment reflected her belief system about fitting in with different groups on campus. Combined with her precollege experience attending a predominantly White private school, these factors influenced her interactions in positive ways to develop social capital, as supported by the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Laila got support from faculty and peers because she was invested academically. She described why she was treated differently than other athletes who shared her intersecting identities:

When it comes to being a Black female athlete in college, there are either two types of stereotypes you will get: 1) you are just athletic and we need to make sure that you're eligible academically, or 2) you have talent and you meet the academic criteria of the university so we don't have much to worry about. For me, I was seen as a leader, someone who didn't get into any trouble, and someone who coaches and administrators didn't have to worry about.

The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) demonstrate how intersecting identities helped some BWBCAs develop social capital through positive relationships with faculty and classmates in their microsystems. However, most participants struggled to foster those academic interactions because of their identities as BWBCAs, so they leveraged other forms of cultural wealth, such as navigational, aspirational, and familial capital, to maneuver through their academic environments (Yosso, 2005). Even though all the participants earned their degree, not all of them achieved academic self-efficacy. Only those with higher academic identities or opportunities for holistic development were able to achieve self-efficacy in the classroom.

### **Holistic Interactions in BWBCAs' Microsystems**

Academic self-efficacy depends on relationships BWBCAs create with people who are invested in their development beyond athletics (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cooper & Hall, 2016; Ofogebu, 2022), which often leads to a greater sense of belonging (Carter-Francique, 2018, 2020). The third theme discusses how BWBCAs' microsystems influence their academic self-efficacy and belonging.

#### ***Opportunities for Holistic Development***

The findings revealed some participants ( $n=5$ ) achieved academic self-efficacy through holistic relationships with faculty, advisors, and assistant coaches. Although some BWBCAs seek mentorship from Black faculty and staff (Carter-Francique, 2014), a few participants ( $n=3$ ) developed relationships with White mentors. Thor described her transformative experience doing an internship with a law professor, who was White:

I want to be just like him. And so I really loved his class. ... He gave me my first internship at his law firm. And I think from that experience ... I think my whole outlook had changed because I realized I love legal work.

Monique recalled the support and mentorship she found doing research with a White professor in the geology department:

The chair of the geology department ... was really supportive and encouraging of me and used that year to, to help mentor me. ... I definitely lucked out in terms of the sense of community I found in the geology department, and that did spill over into other areas.

Kianna's White assistant coach was transformative regarding her academic experience. She recalled how he challenged her academically, connected her with faculty on campus, and gave her the confidence to believe she could excel, resulting in an academic sense of belonging:

He's the one who took the time to teach me soft skills, things like time management, organizational skills, how to prioritize, you know, my work. ... We started to see some progress and then he started to challenge me to do, to do things that I never considered academically, ... got me really engaged in a way that made academics less passive.

Other BWBCAs like Laila and Sydney struggled to find people at their first institutions invested in their holistic development but were fortunate to experience

supportive coaching staffs after transferring to another school who helped develop leadership skills and their non-athletic identities. All five BWBCAs who had opportunities for holistic development graduated with a sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy because they had people who cared about them as more than athletes.

### ***No Opportunities for Holistic Development***

When BWBCAs lack people in their microsystems at PWIs who support them holistically, like Yasmin, TJ, and Aliyah, they often transfer because they do not achieve academic self-efficacy and belonging. Half of the participants ( $n=5$ ) transferred at least once because they received no holistic support on campus. Aliyah never received holistic support and reflected on her lack of belonging in the classroom:

Academically, it's like a blur, you know, I really didn't take a lot of in-person classes. ... I didn't feel like I belonged. ... A lot of professors ... they have these stereotypes about athletes a lot, especially Black athletes. ... At the time, I didn't understand what I felt. But now, looking back, I know exactly how I felt. It's difficult to navigate ... because it's like you walk into a room and you don't fit in, and you don't know why.

Other participants like Tiffany and Simone did not have mentors who understood their specific needs relating to their different identities (Carter & Hart, 2010), but their career goals and academic priorities motivated them to stay at their institutions. Simone believed her basketball schedule complicated her ability to develop faculty relationships. She recalled:

I found it even difficult at times to have time to go to even office hours and things like that. And ... I found it a little bit difficult to connect with faculty members who, I felt like we didn't have like a common ground, if you will, other than them being sports fans.

As Yosso's (2005) CCW framework suggests, navigational and social capital helped BWBCAs identify the people on campus who could support them holistically, enabling them to achieve self-efficacy and belonging. Other BWBCAs felt their faculty and coaches did not support their different identities outside of athletics. Without supportive relationships, BWBCAs lacked a sense of belonging, but they leveraged familial and aspirational capital to earn their degree. For some BWBCAs, the people in the microsystem they interacted most with, like their head coaches, had the power to shape the course of their academic experience.

### **Coaching Ethos**

The final theme described how coaches influence BWBCAs' academic sense of belonging. Black women basketball college athletes' coaches may be the most impactful relationships in their microsystems because of the intense time demands of their sport (Bruening et al., 2005). The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) explains how BWBCAs' intersecting identities influence their relationships with coaches because many coaches lack the cultural awareness to support them. One of the most common themes highlights how the ethos of the BWBCAs' head coach influenced their academic development.

### *Coaches' Negative Impact*

Most BWBCAs ( $n=7$ ), like Simone, Tiffany, Aliyah, and Yasmin, reported their head coaches negatively impacted their academic experiences and belonging. Yasmin described one incident where her White male head coach gave her no support when a faculty member accused her of plagiarism:

[Professor] didn't believe I wrote a paper. He thought that I plagiarized it or whatever, and I certainly didn't, and I knew all the material ... and my coach did not have my back at all. ... At the time, I was already seeing a sports psychologist. ... I was able to be like, "oh my God, please help me. These men are saying that I'm an idiot. And no one is believing me." Yeah, so the sports psychologist was the one who ended up saving me.

Yasmin used social and resistance capital by standing up for her rights and identifying other people in her microsystem (i.e., the sports psychologist) who provided her with resources and support to help her succeed.

Participants like TJ and Sydney experienced negative interactions with their coaches unrelated to academics, but the stress affected their academic success and caused them to transfer. TJ's White male head coach sexually abused her, and the trauma from that experience caused her grades to suffer. She explained the academic and emotional impact:

I received little to no support academically. ... because I was struggling in that one class, [coaches] actually recommended me drop out of the business school ... and to me that was very demoralizing ... just because I was going through a rough time, and they knew the extent of why I was struggling, it just kind of further pushed academics away from me. I just felt like nobody believed in me.

TJ used resistance capital to speak up against the abuse that was inflicted on her by her head coach and aspirational capital to transfer out of a toxic environment. Like TJ, Sydney leveraged resistance capital to transfer after her negative athletic experience with her Black male head coach impacted her academics. She recalled the lack of support from her coach:

He always told me like, you know, I got you, like, if you need anything, just let me know. ... I started to struggle ... and I just felt like he wasn't there for me anymore. ... I had two concussions in 10 months ... I completely spiraled that fall semester, because I went into like a really bad state of depression.

None of the seven BWBCAs who reported negative coaching experiences had a head coach who shared both their racial and gender identities. Some BWBCAs were subordinated by their White and male coaches in a college sports system that empowered their coaches to recruit Black athletes without supporting their intersecting identities or holistic development. When faced with oppression, the BWBCAs felt empowered to leverage their resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) to transfer or find supports at their current institution to help them succeed.

### ***Coaches' Positive Impact***

Only three BWBCAs, Monique, Thor, and Laila, described having head coaches who supported their academic goals. Laila discussed how her Black woman head coach pushed her to excel academically and become engaged in the classroom:

I was challenged to be more than just what I was used to ... pushing me to do things that I just wasn't comfortable doing ... outside of athletics. It was like, "show up to your classes and make yourself known. ... Sit in the first three rows ... If you know the answers, raise your hand. ... Get to know them." And like, that was really important.

Monique was a star player and knew that afforded her some freedoms her teammates did not have. She described the support she received from coaches for her STEM major:

I know that I received a lot of favoritism and flexibility in terms of ... just come, come to practice after your lab or early, practice a little early, to go to your lab. ... I received a lot of grace for my schedule. Yes, it did work out and they were accommodating. Um, but yeah, it wasn't that way for everybody.

When BWBCAs had coaches who valued academic performance as much as athletics, they were encouraged to foster other relationships in their microsystems to further their academic goals and achieve self-efficacy (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The BWBCAs without coaches who supported academic identities had to rely on their cultural wealth to persist and succeed at their PWIs or use resistance capital to transfer (Yosso, 2005).

## **Discussion**

The current study sought to understand how BWBCAs' precollege factors and intersecting identities impacted their academic self-efficacy and belonging as DI athletes at PWIs. This research contributes to existing literature in a few ways. First, it expands on prior anti-deficit research (Cooper et al., 2017b; Ofoegbu, 2025b) by using both the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) to explore how BWBCAs leverage their capital within their microsystems to succeed academically. Since most studies have explored the experiences of the broader BWCA population, this study makes a contribution by centering on the experiences of the BWBCAs in the high-profile sport of basketball to understand how the college sports system impacts their academic experiences through coaching behaviors. Finally, this research contributes to the literature by showing the relationship between a BWBCA's academic identity before college and their academic self-efficacy at the end of their college careers.

When BWBCAs are recruited to play at PWIs, they are encouraged to pursue opportunities that align with the goals and expectations imposed upon them through socialization processes before college (Cooper et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2017b; Hanks, 1979). Most BWBCAs in this study entered college with strong academic identities that family and community members nurtured, a finding consistent with

prior research (Cooper et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2017b). Many of the participants ( $n=7$ ) were prepared for college coursework because they attended academically rigorous private primarily White high schools, which supplied them with the navigational capital necessary to succeed in college (Cooper et al., 2016). A few participants entered college with lower academic identity salience, so their college choice decisions often depended on opportunities for basketball scholarships (Cooper & Jackson, 2019) that could help them earn a college degree (Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Sato et al., 2017). The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) demonstrates how the BWBCAs' precollege experiences, such as their high school education and belief systems about academics, shaped their interactions with faculty, coaches, and advisors in college who could help them achieve their academic goals.

Intersecting identities of race, gender, first-generation status, socioeconomic status, and athlete status created barriers to academic success for most participants, regardless of their academic identity salience (Carter-Francique, 2020; Ferguson, 2023; Ojemaye et al., 2024; Sato et al., 2017). Their identities subjected them to stereotypes which were "simultaneously empowering and disempowering" (Withycombe, 2011, p. 485), impacting relationships with faculty and peers and the ways in which they used their capital to manage those interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Some BWBCAs reported feeling marginalized by faculty and students who held racial stereotypes about their athletic and academic abilities. Rather than feel defeated, the BWBCAs felt empowered to leverage their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and use resistance capital to excel in the classroom and dispel the stereotypes (Cooper et al., 2017b; Cooper et al., 2020; Ofoegbu et al., 2022). Those without strong academic identities had lower academic expectations in college (Cooper & Jackson, 2019; Cooper et al., 2020), but they also leveraged cultural wealth by using aspirational and familial capital to persist when facing obstacles since they were motivated to earn their college degree (Ofoegbu et al., 2022; Withycombe, 2011).

Half of the participants ( $n=5$ ) reported attending college with navigational and social capital, enabling them to develop rapport with professors and classmates easily. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) CCW, TJ, Sydney, and Monique gained social and navigational capital from teammates who helped them navigate the complex academic environment for a BWBCA at a PWI. Although most of the BWBCAs in this study believed their intersecting identities exposed them to numerous academic challenges (Sato et al., 2017; Withycombe, 2011), some felt their identities positively impacted their social and academic experiences, such as relationships with faculty and classmates (Sellers et al., 1997), a finding that diverged from prior research (Ofoegbu, 2022).

Some BWBCAs ( $n = 5$ ) had opportunities for holistic development through relationships with faculty, staff and coaches who cared about their non-athletic identities (Bernhard, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Ofoegbu, 2022; Ojemaye et al., 2024), leading to academic self-efficacy and belonging. These BWBCAs participated in educational activities that developed their other interests, such as faculty research, internships, and leadership training, and contributed to academic self-effi-

cacy. This finding is supported by the Bioecological Framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and shows how influential relationships in BWBCAs' microsystems are on their outcomes.

An interesting finding is athletic and academic identity salience was not necessarily related to the athletes' sense of belonging, which contradicted Gayles et al.'s (2018) research that found academic identity was positively correlated with higher belonging. In the current study, a sense of belonging was positively correlated with opportunities for holistic development, regardless of the salience of the BWBCAs' academic or athletic identities. For example, some BWBCAs who started college with a higher academic identity, like Tiffany and Simone, lacked people in their network who were invested in their holistic development, resulting in a lower sense of belonging. Conversely, others who started college with a higher athletic identity, like Kianna and Sydney, were fortunate to develop relationships with people in their microsystems who cared about their identities outside of basketball, contributing to a higher sense of belonging. All BWBCAs in this study ( $n = 6$ ) with higher academic identity salience achieved academic self-efficacy, regardless of whether they had people invested in their holistic development. Only one of the BWBCAs with higher athletic identity salience achieved academic self-efficacy because she was fortunate to find people interested in supporting her holistically.

Half of the BWBCAs in this study ( $n = 5$ ) reported academic advisors and coaches failed to support them holistically because they were only concerned with keeping them eligible (Comeaux, 2013; Howard-Hamilton, 1993; Ofoegbu, 2025a; Ojemaye et al., 2024), a finding representative of the college sports culture in the BWBCAs' macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). When athletics are prioritized over academics by dictating BWBCAs' choice of major or requiring they take online classes, it heightens their athletic identity salience and lowers their sense of belonging (Gayles et al., 2018; Sato et al., 2017). Their experiences reflect interpersonal exploitation because of the institutional culture that did not support their different identities (Ofoegbu, 2025b). However, the BWBCAs in this study leveraged CCW (Yosso, 2005) by drawing on familial capital for support and using resistance and aspirational capital to transfer to a new institution where they could achieve academic success.

Findings from the current study revealed how influential the coaching ethos is on the BWBCAs' academic experiences (Bruening et al., 2005). This is likely because coaching contracts and athletic schedules in the BWBCAs' exosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) indirectly impact the athletes by putting pressure on their coaches to win games. For some BWBCAs in this study, their head coaches supported their academic development by allowing flexibility with academic schedules, encouraging engagement in the classroom, and creating a culture that valued interactions with faculty (Cooper et al., 2017b). Other BWBCAs in this study lacked support from the head coach, who attempted to silence their voices (Bruening et al., 2005) through microaggressions, control, and favoritism towards White players (Ofoegbu, 2025a, 2025b), or restricted their involvement in meaningful development activities on campus (Comeaux, 2013). These findings represent a form of interper-

sonal exploitation (Ofoegbu, 2025b) and subordination of BWBCAs by coaches who ignore their intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989), leading to marginalization and isolation.

Although most BWBCAs in this study desired greater diversity in their coaching staff (Bernhard, 2014; Ojemaye et al., 2024), not all developed relationships with their Black men or women coaches. This finding diverged from prior research (Ofoegbu, 2022; Ojemaye et al., 2024), in which the BWBCAs’ academic success benefited from racialized support. The current study contributes to existing research by highlighting the holistic support some BWBCAs in this study found in their White coaches and faculty. This is likely due to the BWBCAs’ precollege experiences at private high schools where they were exposed to a predominantly White environment, as well as their belief systems about what they expected to get from their college education. These belief systems shaped their interactions with White mentors and coaches in generative ways (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), contributing to their holistic development, academic self-efficacy, and sense of belonging.

Institutions should create inclusive environments for their BWBCAs (Carter-Francoise, 2018, 2020) and provide holistic opportunities that support their different identities (Bernhard, 2014; Ojemaye et al., 2024). Yet, half of the current participants did not feel valued for their non-athletic identities, leading to lower belonging and decisions to transfer. The findings reflect the realities of macrosystem-level factors, such as campus racial climate, the D1 sports culture, and stereotypes, that impact the BWBCAs’ holistic development by emphasizing athletic success over their wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Although all BWBCAs in this study earned their degrees by leveraging various forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), the marginalization many felt at the hands of those in power like coaches and faculty represent the oppression that BWBCAs may face at PWIs (Crenshaw, 1989).

The pressures on BWBCAs to perform athletically will continue to increase in the coming years, particularly considering recent legislative changes that permit them to earn money from their Name/Image/Likeness (NIL) through external partnerships with sponsors and a college sports revenue sharing plan (The College Student, 2024). Other proposed changes to classify all college athletes as university employees (The College Student, 2024) will further heighten their athletic identities and pressure to succeed on the court, diminishing their chances for academic success. Although these changes give more power to athletes, they will likely impact BWBCAs’ experiences by making relationships with coaches and institutions more transactional (The College Student, 2024).

## Limitations

The current study is not without its limitations. Hearing the experiences of 10 former college athletes offered a unique window into the world of high-profile NCAA DI BWBCAs at PWIs, but their experiences are not generalizable to the entire BWCA population since this was not a quantitative study that garnered a large sample size using a random sampling. However, the findings may be transferable to BWBCAs in other contexts because of the detailed participant accounts that en-

able other researchers “to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context” (Merriam, 2014, p. 229). Future research should explore the academic experiences of all BWBCAs across all divisions and sports. Additionally, their retrospective accounts introduce the possibility of not recalling their experiences accurately. However, interviewing former BWBCAs was essential for understanding how their athletic participation impacted their college outcomes.

## **Implications**

### ***Research and Theory Implications***

The findings from this study suggest that more research is needed on the academic experiences of BWBCAs. Since some participants found holistic support from White faculty and coaches, research could explore the differences in holistic support across gender and racial backgrounds of coaches by interviewing current BWBCAs. Additional research could compare college choice decisions of BWBCAs in multiple sports across all NCAA divisions, as the current research was limited to DI women’s basketball. For example, how does the influence of academic identity salience on college choice decisions differ for BWBCAs in different sports and different divisions? The BWBCAs who participated in holistic development activities such as internships and faculty research felt a sense of belonging at their institutions. Future studies could explore the feasibility of internship programs and faculty research geared towards college athletes. One possible research question could explore the level of support for athlete-specific internship and research programs among coaches and athletic administrators and compare these findings across divisions. Because the findings highlighted how BWBCAs’ intersecting identities influenced their academic experiences, a new theoretical framework should be developed to help researchers and practitioners understand how the college sport environments and BWBCAs’ identities shape their academic experiences and outcomes.

### ***Practice Implications***

This qualitative study makes an important contribution to the literature by allowing former BWBCAs to reflect on their academic experiences at PWIs and highlighting the strengths that helped them succeed. Since not all participants had a positive academic experience, the findings have implications for improving their academic sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Participant interviews highlighted how coaching ethos and values can shape a BWBCA’s academic experience. The coaching staff must value the BWBCAs’ academic goals and success as much as athletic performance by providing flexibility and support for academic and career pursuits. This includes support for mentorship opportunities by allowing BWBCAs the time to build these important relationships. Mentorship programs that connect BWBCAs with advisors and alumni who share similar backgrounds (Carter & Hart, 2010) may also work to further curate positive social and academic collegiate and post-collegiate experiences for the BWBCAs.

Similarly, hiring more coaches who reflect the BWBCAs’ diversity, particularly Black women coaches, can greatly enhance their sense of belonging by offering relatable role models who understand the unique challenges this particular group may face and can foster a sense of community and support to help BWBCAs feel seen and valued (Bernhard, 2014; Ojemaye et al., 2024). Additionally, mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion training for all staff and regular check-ins by athletic directors and campus leadership can work to address and mitigate microaggressive interactions among coaches, professors, and players, ultimately fostering a more inclusive environment. Lastly, creating dedicated spaces for BWBCAs to share their experiences may further empower this group to affirm their importance within the campus community, athletically and academically (Carter-Francique, 2014; Ferguson, 2023).

## Conclusion

BWBCAs achieve the impossible by succeeding academically at PWIs that do not support their racial identities and athletically within a White-male dominated college sports system that is financially incentivized to prioritize their athletic success (Cooper & Jackson, 2019). The participants in this study used their aspirational and resistance capital to earn their college degrees (Cooper et al., 2017b; Yosso, 2005) despite systemic barriers and consistent stereotypes about their multiple intersecting identities (Carter-Francique, 2020; Ojemaye et al., 2024). They depended on people in their microsystems at their PWIs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) to invest in their non-athletic identities, and some were fortunate to find mentors who cared about their holistic development (Bimper, 2017; Carter-Francique, 2014; Ofoegbu, 2022). On some occasions, their coaches filled that role (Bernhard, 2014; Bruening et al., 2005; Ofoegbu, 2025a), but often, the participants perceived their coaches to be barriers, leading to anxiety and lower retention (Ojemaye et al., 2024). Regardless of the support they received, the BWBCAs were motivated to earn their degree, even if it required transferring to another university with hopes for a better experience.

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