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“Benefiting Academically from Sports Opportunities”

Older siblings often provide useful insights. Therefore, I was not surprised when my older brother provided a useful insight about college education and black male students who attend college on athletic scholarships. My brother would probably not describe himself as a conservative, but this particular insight is infused with conservative principles.

He started with a simple question: How many Black students attend college today? Answer: According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), about 3.1 million Black students were enrolled in colleges and universities in 2011—the latest year for which data are available.

He followed by asking: How many of those college students are male? Answer: According to NCES, about 1.1 million Black males were enrolled in colleges and universities in 2011.

His third question was: How many of those males are attending college on full or partial athletic scholarships? Answer: The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reports that there were 49,782 Black males participating in college athletics in 2012. In other words, about 5 percent of Black males in college are involved in athletics and have access to scholarships.

Fourth question: What is the graduation rate of Black males who attend college on athletic scholarships? Answer: The NCAA reports that, for Division I colleges and universities, the graduation rate was 80 percent; i.e., 80 percent of student athletes who entered college during the 2005/06 academic year had graduated by the end of the 2012/13 academic year. For Division II schools, the graduation rate was 73%. There were no statistics for Division III schools. However, the Federal Graduation Rate for Black male athletes in Division I schools, which is computed differently by the US Department of Education, was just 60 percent. If we use the Federal Graduation Rate and assume that about one-quarter of Black male college scholarship athletes are in a graduating class each year (~12,500), then about 40 percent or 5,000 of these athletes are not graduating.

Given these questions and answers, my brother’s insight was: If all Black male athletes who are on college scholarships were to graduate, then, over time, that would have a very powerful impact on the total number of Black male college graduates in the US. Specifically, an additional 5,000 Black males would receive a college degree each year. It may not sound like much; however, considered just over a five-year period, 25,000 additional college degrees would be captured by these Black male college athletes.

What a useful insight!

Why? Because we know that Black males with a college degree have a much better chance of landing a job and raising a family properly than does a Black male without a college education—no matter how close to completion of the college education he might be.

The correct follow-on question is: Why don't these college athletes graduate from college? The bottom line answer is that the correct incentives are not in place. What are some of the correct incentives?

- Colleges and Universities that extend athletic scholarships receive only vocal pressure to ensure that their athletes complete their education. If these schools' accreditation or their opportunity to compete were contingent on all athletes completing their education within a five- or six-year period, then you can be assured that athletes would graduate.
- College test admission scores for athletes should be raised to the level expected of other students. This would create an incentive for high school athletes to study more effectively so that they could pass the examination. Such study would prepare these athletes to perform at a higher level academically at the college level; i.e., completing their education would be easier.
- High school graduating standards for athletes should be raised beyond a simple 2.0 grade point average (GPA) to requirements that included passing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) courses, such as Trigonometry or Calculus, Physics, and Chemistry, with at least a 2.0 GPA. As a result, these students would be better prepared to pass college entrance exams and to perform at a higher level at the college level than they are now prepared. Again, graduating would be easier.

Let's be real. Too often, a male athlete who shows promise by the age of 12 begins to slide down a slippery slope academically as most of his attention becomes focused on training and competing athletically. What is required is that parents and coaches at the junior high school, high school, and college levels must stop exploiting these young men and begin to become concerned about their long-term future.

Unfortunately, most athletes' future does not include professional sports. Therefore, to prepare them for life, they need, at a minimum, a college education. With a college degree, they have a chance to capture reasonable employment or to extend their education. Consequently, they will not likely end up on the street as another unemployment statistic.

As college athletes begin to consider unionizing in order to have a voice at the table of the NCAA, we suggest that a more important approach to solving the problem of college athletes is to simply benefit academically from college athletics.

In other words, these athletes should use their scholarships to obtain degrees and not waste opportunities to become educated. This would be a great starting point for improving the quality of their lives and the lives of others in Black America.

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