

# London Thompson, Ed.D

## Research Brief:

### **Unmasking Barriers, Unleashing Potential: A Phenomenological Study on Academic Advisors' Implementation of Critical Support Systems for Black Male Student Athletes' Academic Success**

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## Abstract

Black male student-athletes at predominantly White institutions (PWI) are funneled through Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) programs where advisors primarily focus on maintaining NCAA athletic eligibility instead of degree completion, which is detrimental to their academic identity development. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of academic advisors within SASS programs at PWIs to understand how they perceive their role in supporting the academic identity development and degree completion of Black male student-athletes. To investigate this phenomenon, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and maintained a researcher's journal. Findings suggest (1) SASS professional staff and leadership are predominantly White and female; (2) PWIs routinely admit academically underprepared student-athletes; (3) SASS advisors to primarily focus on eligibility over academic identity development and degree completion; and (4) advisors reported that theory was not a basis for their daily practice.

## Aim

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of academic advisors within SASS programs at PWIs to understand how they perceive their role in supporting the academic identity development and degree completion of Black male student-athletes. To investigate this phenomenon, the researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews as well as maintained a researcher's journal. A predictor of academic self-efficacy (Komarraju & Dial, 2014), academic identity is a person's social identity in terms of group membership as a scholar and part of the larger social construct of higher education. Just as elite student-athletes have developed their athlete identities and feelings of self-efficacy over time through consistent engagement in sport, they can also nurture academic identities and feelings of self-efficacy in academics through consistent engagement and success with academic pursuits (McGill, 2021). For example, advisors can support Black male student-athlete academic identity development by exposing them to caring institutional representatives, helping them make meaning of their experiences, and assisting them in engaging in informed decision-making (McGill, 2021), which in turn will support degree completion. This research explored to what extent academic identity development is prioritized as part of the daily practice of advising Black male student-athletes.

## Sample Group

To participate in this study, academic advisers had to: (a) have at least one year of advising experience at a predominantly White NACADA member institution, (b) provide academic advising services to Black male student-athletes who participate in an NCAA Division I revenue-generating sport, and (c) primarily work as part of a Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) program. Additionally, study participants needed to have the ability to participate virtually in an approximately 90-minute semi-structured interview and an approximately 90-minute semi-structured focus group interview. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary.

## Methods

# London Thompson, Ed.D

The methods that directed this qualitative phenomenological research study included: six one-on-one semi-structured interviews, a focus group with four SASS advisors, and the researcher's journal.

## Findings

Four key results emerged from the data: firstly, SASS professional staff and leadership are predominantly White and female while the athletes they serve are predominantly Black and male. Secondly, PWIs routinely admit academically underprepared student-athletes who are advised through a separate advising track called SASS. Thirdly, the rising professionalism and transfer culture in revenue-generating college sports inform SASS advisors to primarily focus on eligibility over academic identity development and degree completion. Finally, although all of the study participants reported some exposure to theory during their graduate studies, theory does not play a significant role in their daily practice.

## Discussion

It was found that academic advisors play a crucial role in advocating for environmental, educational, and psychosocial support for Black male student-athletes. In light of the findings, four recommendations were suggested: (1) Top-level university leadership should prioritize diversity and inclusion in their hiring practices within Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) programs to ensure their most at-risk populations, who are overwhelmingly Black and male student-athletes, receive the support they need; (2) Athletic programs (recruiters, coaches) should involve Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) advisors in the recruiting process and vet potential recruits with consideration of their academic dispositions; (3) In consideration for the academic implications of student-athletes transferring from one institution to another, policymakers should work with NCAA member institutions to create standardized four to six-year student-athlete degree paths and waive residency requirements; and (4) Because of the valuable work Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) advisors perform in support of vulnerable student-athlete populations, their practice should be informed by an intimate knowledge and dependence on theory as a basis for practice.

## Implications

The results of this study offer several implications for academic advisors who work in SASS programs at PWIs. These results suggest that despite reported diversity efforts, Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS) professional staff and leadership remain predominantly White and female while the athletes they serve are predominantly Black and male. Secondly, the results suggest predominantly White institutions (PWIs) routinely admit underprepared student-athletes who are advised through a separate advising track called Student-athlete Academic Support Services (SASS). Furthermore, as a consequence of the professionalism and transitory nature of revenue-generating sports, SASS academic advisors prioritize eligibility over academic identity development and degree completion.

Furthermore, the results show that despite all study participants reporting some exposure to theory during their graduate studies, theory does not play a significant role in their daily practice. To address this lack of theoretical grounding, it may be helpful for academic advisors to engage in ongoing professional development opportunities that provide exposure to current research and best practices in the field of advising, including topics related to identity development (Alilunas, 2020), social justice (Gasman & Nguyen, 2020), and culturally responsive advising (Sullivan & Hallett, 2021). Additionally, collaboration with colleagues across departments and disciplines may be necessary to address systemic barriers to student success providing a broader perspective on the challenges facing Black male student-athletes and the most effective ways to address them.

# London Thompson, Ed.D

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## Author Information and Biography

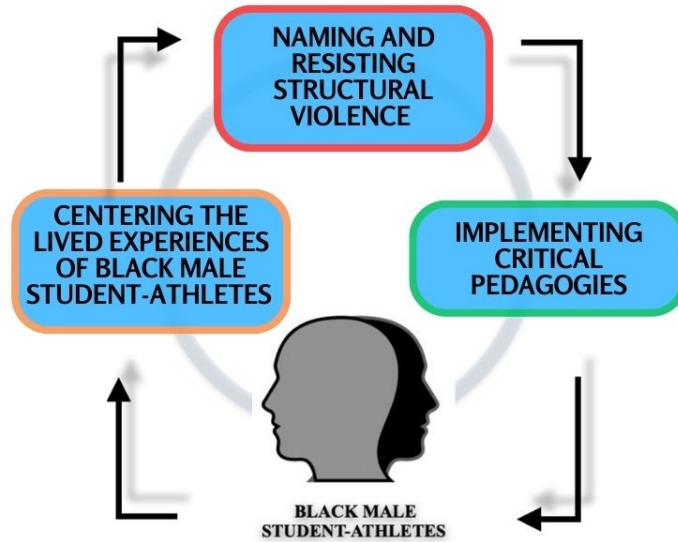
Dr. William London Thompson is a professor of Educational Leadership, currently serving as adjunct faculty at Purdue Global University and Hampton University. He is a Philadelphia native and proud graduate from The University of Hawaii at Manoa (Education Administration, 2019) and Drexel University (Educational Leadership and Management/Athletic Administration, 2023). His higher education experience informs a multifaceted research agenda with the overarching goal of advancing knowledge and catalyzing positive change across various aspects of society. This includes elevating the higher education experience, bridging educational transitions, empowering student-athletes, addressing racial disparities in college athletics, and advocating for equity through critical theory.

London is currently pursuing a Certificate in School Management and Leadership (CSML) at Harvard Business School. Additionally, he has received funding to complete a certification in Applied DEI from the Brown School of Professional Studies, starting in February 2024.

In addition to his academic pursuits, London is the father to five sons and actively contributes to the athletics community. He serves as the head coach for Boys track and field and as the wide receivers coach at Punahou School in Honolulu, HI.

# London Thompson, Ed.D

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