Student affairs scholars have become increasingly interested in the concept of intersectionality, “the idea that the crossing of multiple forms of oppression with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality produces distinct sets of perspectives and consequences among individuals” (Melton & Cunningham, 2012, p. 46). Studies have explored these identities and their relationship to college student learning, development, and success (Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001; Stewart, 2008). However, less attention has been given to the investigation of athletic identity within the concept of intersectionality. Scholars acknowledge that participation in an intercollegiate sport adds an increasingly complex layer to student life, as members of this special population face unique challenges and have needs that set them apart from their nonathlete peers (Gaston Gayles, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001). Time demands, academic issues, and balancing the roles of student and athlete are most often cited as affecting the student athlete experience (Martin, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001). In fact, researchers have found collegiate athletic participation to be related to academic disengagement, attrition, and deviant social behaviors (Adler & Adler, 1991; Hildenbrand, Johnson, & Bogle, 2001)—all of which are antithetical to the educational missions of institutions. The current status of Black male student athletes illuminates the complex nexus of these multiple identities.
The Black Male Student Athlete
Black male student athletes face unique challenges at postsecondary institutions in the United States. Research has found that they are more likely to enter college academically underprepared and less likely to experience positive academic outcomes once enrolled in college (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Sellers, 1992). In addition, Black males at many institutions are overrepresented on athletic teams (particularly in the two largest revenue-generating sports—football and men's basketball) and concurrently underrepresented in the general student body. Disparate enrollment trends not only exacerbate Black male student athletes' marginalization at these institutions but also perpetuate the myths of Black physical superiority and intellectual inferiority (Harper et al., 2013). The pervasiveness of these insidious myths has been found to be salient among faculty, coaches, and peers at postsecondary institutions (Benson, 2000; Martin, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2010), and they have contributed to Black male student athletes' frequent encounters with racial discrimination, social isolation, and academic neglect (Cooper, 2012). Black male student athletes graduate at the lowest rates among all student athlete subgroups, are more likely to report poor psychosocial outcomes, and are less likely to experience postcollege career mobility. As educators committed to holistic student development and success, it is imperative that we actively work toward improving these outcomes.

A Call for Holistic Support
Student affairs professionals must understand and take into account the fact that a Black male student athlete's athletic identity may have as significant an impact on his holistic development as his racial, gender, sociocultural, and academic identities; the intersections of these identities may affect his overall development and success in college and beyond. Specialized services for student athletes have become institutionalized on many college campuses; however, Martin (2009) argued that “depending solely on the resources and services provided by the athletic department can be detrimental to the overall well-being and growth of student athletes” (p. 289) and recommends that student athletes use offices and support services outside athletics. Student affairs professionals, along with faculty and administrators, must establish and sustain collaborative partnerships that use interdisciplinary approaches to address the complex issues facing student athletes from diverse backgrounds (Person & LeNoir, 1997; Watt & Moore, 2001). Concerted institutional efforts can result in well-coordinated and purposefully designed programs and services that facilitate positive educational and developmental outcomes for student athletes.

References


