

The Review of Higher Education

Summer 2003, Volume 26, No. 4, pp. 497–501

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A Response to the Rejoinder

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We appreciate the well-written, cogent response of Nana Osei-Kofi's rejoinder submitted to the *Review of Higher Education*, just as we appreciate the editor's decision to ask us to respond. Our goal in responding is not to counter each of the points Osei-Kofi made in an attempt to prove the worth of the first article. This would not be possible in such a small space, nor is it our primary objective to defend the article we wrote. Rather, we hope that our response continues this discussion in a way that encourages others to think further about these complex and potentially divisive topics.

As we analyzed the data that we collected in this study, we were not surprised by what the student-athletes, coaches, and administrators at the five institutions told us about racial diversity on their teams. Typical responses were of the variety: "Color is not important to me. I don't care if my teammates are purple, blue, or yellow. I just want to win." We noted the relative shallowness of these kinds of responses, their canned nature, and the fact that both African American and White athletes uttered these phrases often. In response, we asked ourselves, "Why is there not a deeper engagement about the role of race in these individuals' lives, in athletics, and on cam-

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pus? Was it really possible that these athletes were so apolitical as to not recognize the importance of race and its social context?”

On second thought, however, we have to come to recognize that such viewpoints are common in athletics. One might recall the scene in the movie *Bull Durham* where the veteran catcher, played by Kevin Costner, explains to the rookie pitcher how he needs to learn his clichés before talking with reporters. A later scene in the film shows the pitcher, having made the major leagues, talking about “taking games one at a time” and “just wanting to help the team.” The statements by those we interviewed were clichés, but they were also heartfelt. We perceived no sense that anyone we interviewed was being duplicitous. Rather, they really hadn’t thought about race and ethnicity in the larger social context in which it is typically discussed in higher education. And, as we discuss later, we believe that their perceptions about working with others who are different from themselves, even if these ideas come from a somewhat naive view about diversity, can offer others on campus some means by which to bring different groups of students together to work towards a common goal.

Nana Osei-Kofi is correct: How intercollegiate athletic teams think about diversity lacks contextual understanding. When we asked White and Black athletes how they dealt with the fact that they often came from vastly different backgrounds and got together with members of a different race only for the purpose of practicing and competing in sports, we were essentially asking them the extent to which they acknowledged the realities of being either White or Black in the context of higher education and intercollegiate athletics. Their responses to these questions— and this may be the fault of the questioner as well as the respondent—did not deal with these realities. Instead, they told us about how they ignored the fact that they were different and had different life opportunities because of the color of their skin. They didn’t speak to the reality of being Black in a society dominated by Whites. For that matter, few athletes noted the lack of African American coaches or athletic administrators in intercollegiate athletics. Nor did they acknowledge the hypocrisy of the different treatment they receive only because of their athletic prowess.

They instead spoke about wanting to win and that what mattered about their teammates was their ability to contribute to that goal. They did not speak of an awareness of racism in society or athletics. Perhaps it was our role to acknowledge this in our initial write-up of the results, but at the time we were so struck by the more self-reflective comments about how to work with those who were different that we didn’t initially contextualize the findings. Rather, we relied on the voices of those we interviewed to tell their stories and to talk about how they dealt with diversity from their perspective—however unexamined it may be.

That said, we did note a significant discrepancy in our findings that made us further question how adept those in athletics really were at working with individuals from different backgrounds. Specifically, when we asked about racial diversity we received the “pat” answers about working together, not caring about differences, etc.; but when we asked about another form of diversity, sexual orientation, the responses we received from the student-athletes, coaches, and administrators were very different. These responses spoke to an inability or unwillingness by those we interviewed to consider race and sexual orientation as two equally valid forms of diversity. It is in this difference that we saw (and see) the point that Osei-Kofi makes: Understanding how differences are perceived requires an understanding of social and historical contexts and a failure to consider such contexts results in a kind of shallowness of thought. This is precisely what we saw on the five campuses we examined, and this is what led us to publish a second article that explored this issue in more depth (Wolf-Wendel, Morphey, & Toma, 2001).

Responses about wanting to win and not caring about with whom, in terms of race, are easily contrasted with those about how homosexuality is dealt with on athletic teams—and would be dealt with if it arose. Interestingly, the same respondents who assured us that the color—even blue!—of their teammates was of no consequence to them were often unwilling to work with athletes who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. We learned, for example, that one university made policy decisions about which women’s sport to start up based on assumptions regarding the relative level of lesbianism among swimmers as compared with softball players. Coaches informed us that homosexuality wasn’t a problem on their teams because “we don’t have any here.” Unable to hide their squeamishness about homosexuality, coaches told us of their good fortune: “Lesbianism hasn’t come here.” Student-athletes also told us of their unwillingness to deal with the issue and talked about their own homophobia: “I am not for . . . letting them touch me. I don’t want to talk about their sexual tendencies. . . . That is their problem.”

To us, these responses indicated a kind of ignorance about homosexuality and the reality that homosexuality is viewed by those in athletics as a threat to the masculinity of sports. We wondered if we would have heard similar remarks elsewhere on campus: in the faculty club? in a classroom? in a student club? at a fraternity house?

We noted (2001), for example, that the differences in how these types of diversity are dealt with on these teams is largely a function of the team members’ ability (or inability) to view diversity as devoid of political and historical context. We note that student athletes are not encouraged, and may be actively discouraged, from proceeding along the stages of identity development—hence the title for our *Review* article: “There Is No ‘I’ in TEAM.” Further, we suggested that it is problematic that athletes are asked

to forego a sense of personal identity and identification with their racial or ethnic background for the sake of conforming to team norms and contributing to team unity. These and related critiques of our initial argument about looking at intercollegiate athletics as a diversity model are raised in our follow-up article and are consistent with Osei-Kofi's critique of our article.

That said, we continue to believe that there are lessons to be learned from athletics, particularly for others who work on college and university campuses and want to help build communities that bridge differences. Our article in the *Review* ends with some applications of the lessons learned from our study of how sports teams deal with diversity. Importantly, in each of those applications, we focus on how there must be a mentor or "coach," as we put it, to help students through exercises in cooperative learning or learning communities. This mentor is an important part of any attempt to apply these lessons to a learning context because it is this person who must have the expertise and ability to make sure the differences among participants in these activities are not glossed over in an attempt to ignore diversity or make it a nonissue. We contrast this recommended role of "coach" to the model followed by most intercollegiate athletic coaches who focus more on winning and minimizing the acknowledgement of difference for the sake of the team rather than on broadening the minds of the student-athletes in their charge. We believe that educators must actively, not passively, acknowledge societal-based differences, account for them, and deal with them. Further, we believe that such linkages across groups need not reinforce the status quo and may even, with the right guidance, be used to make changes in the existing social order. Simply applying the concepts of "common enemy" and "sharing a common goal" is not enough; there must also be conscious attempts to explore difference. These attempts should, as Osei-Kofi states, acknowledge the economic, historical, and political context of diversity and work to bring about change.

Despite their problems, intercollegiate athletics does offer models for how others on campus can bring a diverse group of students together to develop a sense of community. The lessons of sharing a common goal, engaging in frequent, intense interactions, sharing in adversity and hard work, and even having a common enemy have been shown by those in social psychology to be positive tools that educators can use (Allport, 1954; Sherif et al., 1961). It is short-sighted to disregard the positive lessons that intercollegiate athletics can offer us because athletes and coaches are imperfect in their response to diversity. Instead, we should look at what athletics can offer educators from a nuanced vantage point, recognizing the genuinely progressive practices in which athletic teams are currently engaged. This is especially important because athletic teams remain one of the few places on American college campuses where a diversity of students truly do work together.

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