

# *The Hidden Curriculum of College Athletic Recruitment*

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*In this article, Kirsten Hextrum considers institutional avenues that limit upward mobility opportunities by revealing a hidden curriculum of athletic recruiting that favors students from privileged backgrounds. The study's data center on forty-seven life history interviews with National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I athletes from an athletically and academically prestigious university. Hextrum's findings reveal three phases of a hidden curriculum—socialization, covert selection, and overt selection—that secure greater access to elite colleges for White middle-class communities via athletic participation. In this case, social reproduction required active effort by both representatives of higher education and representatives of White middle-class communities to protect existing class and race relations.*

*Keywords:* higher education, hidden curriculum, socialization, social reproduction, intercollegiate athletics

Iceman grew up in a suburban town in the northeastern United States.<sup>1</sup> His father owned a construction business and his mother was a teacher. He attended well-funded public schools, and his parents paid for tutoring and private club sports to supplement his education. Iceman characterized himself as a student who “messed around” instead of paying attention in school, admitting, “There were a lot of letters sent home—a lot of parent-teacher meetings [about my behavior].” By the end of middle school, Iceman realized his behavior and low grades could cost him a college education. Around that same time, a close family friend was recruited to row for an Ivy League university. With the support of his parents, who enrolled him in a Catholic high school with a rowing program, Iceman set a new route to higher education.

I really wanted to go to a good college and make a lot of do-re-mi [money] . . . I saw an opportunity to make up for the fact that I was bad student . . . I was talking to a [Coastal U] volleyball player, and she [said], “I’m basically here because it’s

a means to an end.” You didn’t do very well in high school, so you did much better at something else, so you found a way to get around the whole “having good grades” thing, to get into a top-tier university, to get a better job.

Iceman’s plan succeeded. He joined a rowing program in high school and used his athleticism to enter a top public university. He used sports as a “means to end”—the end being an alternative route to college.

As a White middle-class man, Iceman’s journey is not the story often recounted in media coverage, sports broadcasting commentary, or academic analysis of how individuals use athletics as a route to college. More often we hear narratives like that of National Football League (NFL) running back Marshawn Lynch. Lynch grew up as a low-income Black youth in a segregated neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was raised by a single mother while his father served multiple prison sentences. Lynch’s rise to college and NFL stardom is attributed to his athletic ability and determination to transcend systemic poverty and racism: “Lynch’s coach in high school said Lynch grew up so angry about the situation with his father that he . . . tapped into that emotion when he was on the field, developing a running style that led to the catchphrase ‘Beast Mode’” (Peter, 2015, para. 15). Stories like Lynch’s, which feature narratives of individual resilience overcoming unequal social circumstances, position school sports as vehicles of upward mobility, particularly for marginalized students of color. These same narratives justify why colleges offer sports programs despite the continued financial deficits and controversy often associated with intercollegiate athletics (Clotfelter, 2011; Smith, 2011). The athletic recruitment and admissions processes in American universities allow institutions to use alternative criteria—namely, athletic talent—to fill sports roster spots and contribute to well-rounded freshman classes (Schulman & Bowen, 2001). The overrepresentation of Black men in football and men’s basketball could suggest that exceptional admissions processes also provide racial diversity to predominately White institutions (Davis, Thornton, & Moxley-Kelly, 2017; Eitzen, 2016; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013).

However, racial demographics of college athletes show a different picture. Within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletics, most scholarship recipients (60.4 percent) are White. White women number even greater, at 67 percent of women scholarship recipients (NCAA, 2017b). The numbers are more drastic in “country club sports” like rowing, lacrosse, and water polo, which are almost exclusively White (Butler & Lopiano, 2003; DeLuca, 2013; Leonard, 2017). While there is no national measure for student-athletes’ class status, other fields link White racial groups with higher economic standing (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Fraser, 2014; Marable, 2015; Riley, 2018). The lack of diversity within college athletics suggests that sports is not a mobility pathway and instead reinforces existing inequalities by favoring students from well-funded, majority-White communities.

This article explores how higher education supports an avenue for White middle-class athletes to access colleges through sports. It positions social reproduction as an active process requiring effort by both higher education and White middle-class communities. Social reproduction is realized through a hidden curriculum of athletic recruitment that occurs in three phases: socialization, covert selection, and overt selection.

## Frameworks

In characterizing the hidden curriculum, Vallance (1980) stated that “it is both the strength and the weakness of the ‘hidden curriculum’ concept that it is nearly impossible to pin down” and defined the hidden curriculum as something “that happens without our planning for it and without our prior knowledge” (p. 139). Thirty-eight years later the hidden curriculum remains a diffuse theory that has traversed beyond education. Researchers now speak of a hidden curriculum of media (Horn, 2003; Stanek, Clarkin, Bould, & Doja, 2015), a hidden curriculum of medicine (Allan, Smith, & O’Driscoll, 2011; Karnieli-Miller, Vu, Holtman, Clyman, & Inui, 2010), a hidden curriculum of advertising (Mason, 2015). Given such varied applications, it is worth recounting the genealogy of the theory before applying it to intercollegiate athletics.

The *something* that occurs in schools without explicit planning emerged from Jackson’s (1968) ethnography of a school classroom. Jackson observed how the school day was consumed by tasks with little connection to the formal transmission of knowledge and how the day consisted of socialization tasks, such as training children to stand in line, be quiet, or raise their hand. Coining the term *hidden curriculum*, Snyder (1973) observed the curriculum at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and delineated two purposes of schooling: the “formal” curriculum that is publicly available through materials like syllabi and textbooks and the “informal” and “hidden curriculum,” the implied tasks necessary for successful matriculation but disguised from the public. Read together, Jackson’s (1968) and Snyder’s (1973) work suggested that educational reformers must conceptualize education beyond the tangible facets of policy or formal curriculum.

Marxist-based educational researchers expanded the hidden curriculum to link schooling practices to the maintenance of broader social inequality. One approach examined linkages between family and school socialization practices (Anyon, 1983; Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1981; McLaren, 2014), outlining how the hidden curriculum is a socialization process in which students implicitly understand, without explicit instruction, how to complete tasks in school. Students who intuit this process are quickly elevated within education; those who struggle are labeled as deficient or unintelligent, as falling behind on assignments and tasks, and are placed into easier classes. Researchers tied the hidden curriculum to reproducing larger inequality by showcasing how the behav-

iors required for school success aligned with behaviors White middle-class communities socialized into their youth (Anyon, 1983; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2011; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Oakes, 2005). For instance, Bernstein's (2003) ethnographies of neighborhoods revealed how schools favored and incorporated the language practices socialized in middle-class households, thus granting middle-class students an immediate advantage.

Another Marxist approach examined the ideological dimension of schooling, or how the formal curriculum is equally value laden and infused with meaning (Apple, 2004; Beyer & Apple, 1988; Giroux, 1981; Jachim, 1987). For instance, school curricula train students to view knowledge as static, unchanging, and objective rather than to view knowledge in its truer form, as an ever-changing project that is influenced by funding, paradigm entrenchment, and nation-building projects (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1981).

The Marxist approach to school curricula linked state-sponsored educational systems to maintaining rather than minimizing the class system. But there are at least two limitations to this approach. First, reproduction can become unidirectional, with students losing their agency and ability to enact or resist the class system (Willis, 1977). More recent scholarship explores *how* middle-class youth learn to enact the behaviors that are favored in the school system and in turn advantage them in the labor market (Calarco, 2014; Kaufman, 2005; Lareau, 2011). Second, Marxist inquiry elevates economic inequality as *the* form of oppression and race and gender as by-products of class reproduction (Fraser, 2014; Lather, 2017; Leonardo, 2009). Leonardo (2009) offered a platform to retain the mechanisms outline by Marxism—the connection between schools, politics, and the economy—while also examining race reproduction in his theory of racialized schooling. He examined how schools support White supremacy along three dimensions: psychologically, how schools train individuals to internalize their racial position within a White supremacist hierarchy; socially, how schools forge racial positions through social interactions with students, teachers, and administrators; and materially, how schools reinforce racial positions to receive different economic and political outcomes that shape one's social standing. This positions race as a historically fabricated, institutionalized, and totalized power structure with material impacts and challenges scholars to investigate how schools socialize people of color to occupy the bottom of a racial order *and* how White people are socialized to protect and maintain their position at the top of a racial order. Leonardo's (2009) framework is used to address the limitations of the hidden curriculum approach to reproduction by examining a hidden curriculum of athletic recruitment that is not readily visible to the public, that favors the socialization patterns of White middle-class communities, and that requires active effort by both White middle-class communities and higher education to reproduce power relationships.

## Literature Review

Common approaches to uncovering how higher education favors White and middle-class communities include tracking student background characteristics (e.g., Davies & Guppy, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Teranishi & Parker, 2010) and examining institutional norms, behaviors, and symbols that marginalize and harm low-income students and students of color (e.g., Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016; Gusa, 2010; Orozco & Diaz, 2016; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009; Ternes, 2016). Yet, the hidden curriculum approach remains underutilized in studies of higher education inequity.<sup>2</sup> One such underinvestigated higher ed space is intercollegiate athletics. A wide search of the sports literature reveals only scant references to the hidden curriculum in high school physical education classes (Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004; Wilkinson & Penney, 2016) and in professional sports (Cushion & Jones, 2014) and no references to college athletic recruitment.

Research on athletic recruitment often examines how institutions create exceptional admissions practices by lowering academic standards for student-athletes in order to enhance their athletic programs (Bok, 2003; Eitzen, 2016; Schulman & Bowen, 2001). Universities with flexible athletic admissions standards often market these practices as part of an effort to produce a well-rounded incoming class and to enhance the school's national reputation through winning athletic programs (Bok, 2003; Clotfelter, 2011; Schulman & Bowen, 2001; Rubin & Moses, 2017; Smith, 2011; Sperber, 2000). This different admissions pathway can encourage student-athletes to favor their athletic commitments over their academic commitments (Schulman & Bowen, 2001; Smith, 2011; Sperber, 2000) and can contribute to student-athletes' academic underperformance in GPA, major selection, and graduation rates, particularly when universities lack adequate academic support programs (Beamon, 2008, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; McCormick & McCormick, 2006; Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Research on athletic admissions primarily targets Division I Black men in the revenue sports of football and basketball. Findings highlight that Black male revenue athletes are more likely to pursue athletics as a route to college, to face and succumb to the intellectually inferior "dumb jock" stereotype, and to become consumed by their athletic responsibilities (e.g., Bimper, 2015; Beamon & Bell, 2002, 2006; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Lawrence, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2016). The focus on Black men in revenue sports has drawn much-needed institutional and cultural attention to universities' racially and economically exploitative athletic conditions (Beamon, 2008, 2010; Edwards, 1985; 2000; Polite & Hawkins, 2011).

The hypervisibility of Black men in research on athletic admissions and achievement also obscures how Whiteness permeates college sports. Sports are positioned as a lottery system that Black communities naïvely pursue with slim

odds of success (Edwards, 1985, 2000). Yet, if White men retain power and control in college sports (Bimper, 2015; Cooper, Gawrysiak, & Hawkins, 2012; Eitzen, 2016; Messner, 2002), one could assume that White men wield greater influence over athletic recruitment. The centrality of Black communities in athletic recruitment also disguises how White communities pursue sports for mobility purposes. As a result, the role of White people as powerbrokers and pursuers of athletic recruitment remains disguised.

Leonardo's (2009) conceptualization of power structures along three dimensions—psychological, social, and material—illuminates how college sports remains a White-male institution, with only limited inclusion of women and people of color. Psychologically, sports remains a central cultural site for athletes and fans alike to learn and internalize different and unequal race and gender subject positions that deem women as inherently physically inferior to men and Black people as inherently physically superior to White people (Ash, Sanderson, Kumanyika, & Gramlich, 2017; Beamon, 2010; Bimper, 2015; Cooper et al., 2012; Eitzen, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2016; Sailes, 2010). These subjectivities are reinforced through social interactions, such as athletes' interactions with the campus community (Davis, Thornton, & Moxley-Kelly, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2016; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004), and through fans' interactions with one another and media coverage (Ash et al., 2017; Carter-Francique, 2014; Cleland, 2014; Musto, Cooky, & Messner, 2017; Sailes, 2010). Lawrence et al. (2016) illustrated how media portrayals inform college students' perceptions of athletes as more likely to be Black men football players who are underachievers, unintelligent, and unmotivated.

The material consequences are evident as White people, and men in particular, dominate leadership and authority positions. In 2017, 86.5 percent of Division I coaches, 86.1 percent of athletic directors, and 89.2 percent university presidents were White. Men coached 60.2 percent of women's teams and 95.3 percent of men's teams, and men made up 90.2 percent of athletic directors and 84.6 percent of university presidents (Lapchick, 2018). The above studies illustrate how college sports is a raced/gendered/classed institution: unequal race and gender power structures inform the structure, organization, operations, and material outcomes of college sports in ways that disproportionately benefit elite White men (Bimper, 2015; Eitzen, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Messner, 2002).

Combining Leonardo's (2009) conceptualization of race reproduction and the hidden curriculum framework, this study expands higher education and sports fields in several ways. First, it refocuses college athletic access away from individual attributes and toward institutional and cultural processes. Second, it brings the hidden curriculum framework into spaces connected to but beyond the classroom. Third, it offers a new dimension to the framework in which the "hidden" part of the curriculum becomes more intentional and overt. Finally, it racializes the athletic recruitment process in new ways, showcasing how White people shape and maintain an alternative admissions process.

## Methods

Research states that most collegiate athletes emerge from White middle-class communities (Butler & Lopiano, 2003; DeLuca, 2013; Hextrum, in press; Leonard, 2017). Yet the presence of college athletes who are more likely White and middle-class does not explain what specific features within higher education disproportionately favor these students. The findings I present here emerge from a larger study of how college sports may favor White middle-class communities, in particular the more prevalent yet understudied Olympic sports. My methods included conducting life history interviews with forty-seven student-athletes attending one academically and athletically elite university, Coastal U. I conducted a secondary analysis of the original interview transcripts to address the question, *In what ways may higher education favor White middle-class communities in athletic recruitment?*

Life history interviews allow the participant to drive the interview and construct their own meaning of events and the researchers to center people's stories to understand cultural and social contexts (Creswell, 2013). The life histories helped uncover the processes that influenced participants' access to institutions; how they made sense of current experiences; and how the access and experience shaped their view of the future (Gouthro, 2014; Smith, 2012). The student-athlete participants in my study used this format to explore the precollege factors that shaped their athletic recruitment. When possible, I corroborated the life history interviews with existing athletic recruitment regulations, such as the NCAA (2017a) handbook.

I recruited participants using purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The purposive sampling involved narrowing the potential athlete involvement down to four teams representing Olympic sports: men's and women's track and field and men's and women's rowing. Each team supports approximately fifty athletes, which means these sports comprised about one-quarter of Coastal U's varsity athlete population. The teams also reflected the demographic variance. Because it requires considerable resources, rowing draws from White and elite communities (Bourdieu, 1978; Eitzen, 2016; Wessells, 2011). Conversely, because it requires fewer resources, track draws from lower-income communities (Bourdieu, 1978; Eitzen, 2016). I determined that recruiting participants from these sports could offer insights into how power structures differently impact access to college via athletics within and across race, class, and gender categories.

I recruited athletes first by attending team meetings to present the research opportunity. I then asked initial volunteers to participate in snowball recruitment (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), to refer their teammates as possible participants. Athletes self-identified their race and gender positions: 28 identified as women and 19 as men; 11 identified as people of color and 36 as White. Only 3 athletes (all women) were low income; the rest were middle- or upper-middle-class.<sup>3</sup> The overrepresentation of middle- and upper-middle-class athletes became a central line of inquiry for this study.

During my year of data collection, I employed several strategies to develop study themes: documenting my general observations through field notes taken after each interview; maintaining a list of emergent themes; developing a coding process; sharing my initial findings with college sports insiders; and sharing my first research write-up with participants to solicit feedback on initial findings. My coding process included both emergent (open-coding) and fixed-coding approaches (Creswell, 2013). During the emergent coding phase I read the interview transcript to identify any possible theme, repetition, or pattern. I used descriptive language and stayed as close as possible to the text and to each participant's account (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Emergent coding revealed new themes not identified in the literature or previously considered by the researcher. For instance, twenty-eight participants used the phrase (or one closely related) "market oneself" in response to the prompt "Describe how athletic recruitment began." I then used fixed codes—the terms and phrases I gathered through the study's framework, existing literature, and field notes—in response to the same question to reveal the elaborate support systems suggested by social reproduction that facilitate institutional access, namely family, community members, friends, teammates, and coaches. These two phases generated a long list of coded interview text. I then used axial coding (table 1) to group the codes into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). During this phase I became the "primary instrument" of analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 261) and interpreted the descriptive codes to identify higher-order themes. The entire process relied on iterative analysis; my insights deepened through a rereading and refinement of coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

## Findings

The formal or publicly available curriculum for aspiring student-athletes comes from the college sports governing body, the NCAA (2017a), which regulates several aspects of athletic recruiting, including the timeline and number of contacts between university officials and recruits and minimum academic threshold for recruitment. Yet the NCAA does not regulate what constitutes athletic merit and grants universities discretion to define and evaluate athletic ability. The hidden curriculum within athletic recruiting is how universities assess athletic talent, and my findings show that it occurs in three phases: socialization, covert selection, and overt selection. Social reproduction occurred in my study as athletes with greater race and class standing also had greater access to each phase of recruitment.

### *Socialization: Learning the Skills to Navigate College Athletic Recruitment*

The first phase, socialization, involves the interactions that instill behaviors, attitudes, and norms into youth athletes that position them as desirable college recruits. As Jackson (1968) observed, socialization in schools is more prevalent than the attainment of knowledge required to be a student, or, in this

TABLE 1 Sample of qualitative coding

<i>Lower-order code</i>	<i>Axial code</i>	<i>Higher-order code (fixed code)</i>
Strong reputation: Olympian; college athlete; national team; met with prospective college coaches; knowledge of recruiting process; vision of pipeline; recommendation; ties to Coastal U	Coach	Social relationships
		<i>Higher-order code (emergent code)</i>
Emphasize strengths: Press coverage; height/weight; numerical measures; prestigious races; national team affiliation; ties to Coastal U	Résumés	Marketing campaign

case, to be a college athlete. Instead of teachers as the primary *input* of socialization, for the athletes in my study the primary socializers were caregivers, coaches, and teammates. Fixed coding revealed that social interactions were paramount to improving chances for athletic recruitment and that there were formalized opportunities for sport socializing at the youth and high school levels fifteen to eighteen hours per week year-round (table 2). The *output* of socialization is the enactment of skills needed to navigate a nebulous college athletic recruiting process (figure 1). Through sport socialization, athletes learned the subjective traits that could better position them to be recruited. Interviews revealed three common insights that enhance athletic recruitment: merit is subjective and moldable; athletes should initiate recruitment; and merit is imbued with raced/gendered meanings.

Across the study, participants more often recalled subjective rather than objective definitions of athletic merit. Only 12 said that colleges required a benchmark of athletic ability, such as achieving a certain time or score in their sport. On another measure, only 17 believed that their athletic performance at a competition initiated their college recruitment. In describing what characteristics colleges valued in potential recruits, participants cited a range of conflicting attributes. For instance, 38 of the athletes believed competitiveness was valued, and 39 believed collaboration was valued (figure 1).

I include the recruiting narratives of two participants, Captain America and Duane, to represent study narratives and to illustrate how merit is subjective and how athletes must initiate recruitment. As a White woman and a Black man, respectively, their stories also reflect how merit is imbued with raced/gendered meanings.

Captain America, an upper-middle-class White woman, was a standout rower in her club. She competed at top regattas, including junior world championships, but still feared she would not become a college-level rower. Her club was ranked low, her coach had few connections, and she lived in an area not

TABLE 2 *Sports time commitment before college*

<i>Sport</i>	<i>Youth sports year-round</i>	<i>High school sports year-round</i>	<i>Twice-daily workouts</i>	<i>Average practice time (hours) per week</i>
Women’s track & field	67% (N, 6)	80% (N, 8)	20% (N, 2)	15.45
Women’s crew	56% (N, 10)	78% (N, 14)	44% (N, 8)	17.47
Men’s track & field	92% (N, 11)	83% (N, 10)	33% (N, 4)	17.79
Men’s crew	71% (N, 5)	71% (N, 5)	43% (N, 3)	17.5
Total (N, 47)	68% (N, 32)	79% (N, 37)	36% (N, 17)	17.1

*Note:* Practice time excludes commuting, traveling, and meets/competitions.

known for rowing. But through the Junior National Team, she gained a wider socialization network, including coaches and athletes involved with college recruiting. There she learned to be “aggressive” and “proactive” during the recruiting process. Namely, she learned that she should not wait for colleges to approach her, that she should approach colleges.

You may think you’re being aggressive, but coaches get swamped with e-mails, and the more that they know your name, the better it is for you . . . I’d say I was aggressive with the e-mailing . . . I e-mailed for like five weeks in a row . . . If I PRd [made a personal record], I would send them my results . . . If we went to a regatta, I sent them my results.

Even as a top White woman athlete, Captain America made a constant effort to ensure that the coaches would not forget about her. The act of being “aggressive” in the recruiting process signified that she had the desired quality of a college-level athlete. She learned she could not rely on her athletic scores to speak for themselves and instead diligently reminded potential coaches of her presence and achievements.

Duane, a middle-class Black man and a top regional 800-meter runner, also learned he should be proactive in the recruiting process. His coach, however, offered different advice about the recruitment process. Duane learned he must be “humble” and avoid aggressive expressions that could be misconstrued as “entitled” or arrogant. He learned to be “respectful, being mindful, not being that cocky kid who’s like, ‘Well I’m the best, what do you have to offer me?’ Being humble like, ‘This is a great experience, thank you so much for the opportunity.’”

Duane and Captain America both had elements of their identity that related to a dominant social category—Duane’s masculinity and Captain America’s Whiteness—yet neither fully occupied the privileged category. Duane learned to tone down the “cool pose” during the recruitment process, the boisterous, hyperaggressive, and confident acts of masculinity performance associated

FIGURE 1 Features of the hidden curriculum in college athletic recruiting

Socialization		Reproduction: Covert		Reproduction: Overt	
Input	Output	Student Behavior	Institutional Behavior	Student Behavior	Institutional Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregivers</li> <li>• Coaches</li> <li>• Teammates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Hard worker</li> <li>• Natural athletic ability</li> <li>• Achievement oriented</li> <li>• Obedient</li> <li>• Leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selects sport to favor recruitment</li> <li>• Researches recruitment process</li> <li>• Devises marketing campaign</li> <li>• Makes unofficial visits</li> <li>• Completes recruit questionnaires</li> <li>• Attends athletic camps</li> <li>• Performs well at top meets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does scouting</li> <li>• Encourages unofficial visits</li> <li>• Sets nebulous standards</li> <li>• Has no recruiting or scholarship negotiation policies</li> <li>• College teammates judge recruits</li> <li>• Evaluate "fit" with team</li> <li>• College coach processes admission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregiver, teammates, or HS coach makes marketing materials</li> <li>• HS coach's reputation ignites recruiting</li> <li>• HS coach's recommendation secures admissions</li> <li>• HS teammate's recommendation secures admission</li> <li>• Negotiates athletic scholarship</li> <li>• Takes gap year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Favors prestigious HS athletic programs and coaches</li> <li>• Uses HS coaches to identify recruits</li> <li>• Favors HS coach's recommendation in the admission process</li> <li>• Favors HS teammate's recommendations in the admission process</li> </ul>

Notes: *Student behavior* refers to the strategies students relied on to better position themselves for athletic recruitment. *Institutional behavior* refers to the strategies institutions relied on to identify recruits. Students who predicted and enacted the strategies that aligned with athletic recruitment were better positioned to succeed in this process. As a result, the columns may mirror one another. For instance, under Student Behavior, "HS coach's recommendation" was an important strategy some students used to gain favor in the process because institutions "favor HS coach" recommendations in the recruiting process.

with Black athletes (Majors, 2001). And, conversely, Captain America learned to leave behind the passivity associated with White women (Messner, 2002; Musto et al., 2017) and instead display hyperaggressive traits during recruitment. None of the White male athletes in the study recalled receiving advice from their sport communities to change their personality or behavior. Duane and Captain America learned that their exemplary athletic performance was not enough for college recruitment. Instead, in an institution whose practices, norms, and values elevate White men above others (Bimper, 2015; Cooper et al., 2012; Eitzen, 2016; Messner, 2002), Duane and Captain America had to not only overperform athletically but also modify their behavior to gain access.

*Covert Selection: Enacting the Skills to Be a Desirable College Recruit*

During athletic selection, the second and third phases of the hidden curriculum, access is diminished as athletes from particular backgrounds are more likely to be socialized into the behaviors favored by institutions, thus achieving social reproduction. Student behavior (socialized characteristics) interacts with institutional behavior (policies and actions supported college representatives) to limit broad-based access to college athletics (figure 1).

Social reproduction occurs when the socialization process, or the behind-the-scenes work of student-athletes' social connections, matches institutional behavior, or the social actors, regulations, policies, and selection processes (Anyon, 1983; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McLaren, 2014). As figure 2 illustrates, all athletes are socialized, but not all athletes could adequately conform to institutional standards. Athletes who reached the second phase were more likely to be White and middle-class or to live in a White middle-class community. The material dimensions of race (Leonardo, 2009) are evident here, as White middle-class communities more often have the resources to help athletes fit higher education institutional standards. Examples of enacted socialized behaviors aligning with institutional policies include how athletes learned to create elaborate marketing campaigns to sell themselves to colleges and how they made unofficial visits to campuses to meet with coaches.

The marketing campaign often began with the student-athlete sending an e-mail of interest to college coaches. In most instances their high school coaches, teammates, or parents helped draft the e-mail. Reggie, a White middle-class man, relied on an older teammate who'd been recruited to an Ivy League school to assist him: "His advice was to approach as many [coaches] as you can." He also took his friend's advice and included in his e-mail a detail to improve responsiveness: "He told [me] to tell everyone that they're your top choice."

Another marketing effort included submitting elaborate athletic résumés that highlighted assets and disguised weaknesses. Amanda, a White middle-class woman, was mentored by a teammate who told her she must emphasize her "potential" since she lacked strong objective measures, namely a fast time on her 2K (a rowing test). Amanda explained, "I knew that [my] strong suits

FIGURE 2 Phases of the hidden curriculum in college athletic recruiting

<p>Phase 1</p> <p><b>Socialization</b></p> <p>Athletes learned and displayed athletic competencies.</p>	<p>Phase 2</p> <p><b>Covert Selection</b></p> <p>Athletes that best conform to the subjective criteria offered by institutions are selected.</p>	<p>Phase 3</p> <p><b>Overt Selection</b></p> <p>Athletes relied on social contacts and resources for access. In some cases, little athletic merit was required.</p>
<p>All athletes</p> <p style="text-align: right;">➔</p>	<p>Some people of color and all White middle- and upper-middle-class athletes</p> <p style="text-align: right;">➔</p>	<p>White middle- and upper-middle-class athletes.</p>

were my GPA, my height, and my years of rowing experience. I knew that my 2K wasn't that big of a selling point. So I focused on those three things."

Some took the résumé process a step further, creating meticulous portfolios of athletic achievements, including a history of times, scores, and meets attended; national team appearances; teammates who were recruited athletes; and media coverage. Stella, a White middle-class woman, did not row in high school but hoped to be recruited to a top program based on her athleticism in other sports. She viewed the recruiting process as "mostly just 'fake it till you make it.' You have to be your own advocate, and [give the impression of] 'I am a big deal.' One of my coaches went to the Olympics a lot. So she wrote me a letter, and I put it on Olympic letterhead. It looked really cool." And when Coastal U responded to her letter with an invitation to take an *unofficial* visit, Stella took the coaches a box of chocolates. She believed that these personal touches went a long way toward her recruitment by Coastal U despite her lack of experience in the sport.

The unofficial visit is the second example of covert reproduction that illustrates the convenient alignment between middle-class White behaviors and resources and institutional procedures. The unofficial recruiting visit is underregulated by the NCAA and grants certain student-athletes greater access and favor during the recruitment process. The NCAA's official curriculum is the 428-page manual of college athletic rules, and the recruiting process is so highly regulated it gets its own 63-page chapter (NCAA, 2017a). The recruiting rules regulate the resources and timelines from which colleges can contact potential recruits. For instance, starting on July 7 after the student's junior year, coaches can invite prospects to visit the campus. Each student-athlete can accept five paid-for, official visits during their recruiting process. The NCAA also regulates these visits by limiting the visit length to forty-eight hours and limiting the spending on food, housing, transportation, and entertainment for the visit.

However, athletes can take an unlimited number of unofficial campus visits, trips to universities paid for by the student and/or their families. As in Stella's case, college coaches can invite potential athletes to take an unofficial visit to the campus, saving the college program the resources and regulatory oversight of an official visit. The unofficial visit advantages students with financial means, knowledge, and social connections. Of the three low-income students in the study, only one took an unofficial visit, and that was only because she lived close to the university. Even then, her recruiting process unfolded through the official, regulated channels, as she went on two university-sponsored visits to other campuses.

Twenty-eight participants took unofficial visits to Coastal U. On these visits, five athletes received admissions offers during these informal conversations. London, who self-identified as a "White—Middle Eastern" middle-class woman, was one such athlete. During London's junior year of high school, her family sponsored college trips along both US coasts, during which she unofficially met with twenty prospective track coaches. London was injured at the time and had not yet posted any college-level scores. Her last unofficial visit was to Coastal U. She was nervous because of the school's reputation and thought she had little to no chance of gaining admission.

[The coaches] sat me down for a two-hour interview . . . And I talked the whole time. Debate [Club] definitely helped me . . . to be comfortable with public speaking. The whole recruiting process was a whole lesson on how to sell yourself [and explain] why you are better than the person who's trying to compete for your spot . . . And at the end of the interview they were like, "OK, we want to give you something . . . We'll mark your application for you if you want to come here."

London said that during her interview she talked about "how the independence of being a track athlete transfers over to [her] school and academic life," how she would "just purposefully weave in who I was into my answers. And I don't think that everyone does that. But I just sort of knew that I had to." London believed she intuited the recruiting process. In reality, however, she had experience and coaching that likely assisted her access. Her extracurricular experience in school debate taught her skills in argument of persuasion. Furthermore, Coastal U was her twentieth college visit. At that point, she had extensive interview practice and feedback. She described various rejections that took place during other unofficial visits and how she asked for feedback on what to change in her interactions with coaches. Thus, through her socialization and her socioeconomic resources, she gained the experience needed to intuit what the coaches wanted to hear, namely that she was confident, independent, had a strong work ethic, and could balance the rigors of competitive athletic and academic programs.

Participants spoke of how college coaches encouraged unofficial visits. Merlin, a White middle-class man, recalled how he was recruited after "the coach

added me on Facebook. And then we just got to talking and he's like, 'Oh, you should come on an unofficial,' and so I went on an unofficial." Merlin drove eight hours to Coastal U, footing the bill for his gas and lodging for the unofficial visit. But the trip paid off, and the following fall semester he was a member of the Coastal U track team.

The impact of this hidden curriculum is evident in how it limits opportunity for aspiring athletes who are people of color and/or lower income. During the study, almost all of the 120 rowers at Coastal U were White. In her narrative, Noelle described the ambiguous criteria for team membership that may have contributed to the team's demographics. As a White middle-class woman, Noelle joined a private rowing club in the fall of her senior year of high school. She was one of twenty-one study participants coached to join a particular sport because it provided greater college access. She had rowed for only a matter of weeks when her recruiting process began. Reflecting on what allowed her to be recruited to one of the top programs in the nation, she recalled a tenuous criterion—that she was a "good fit." She explained how recruiting was also one of the reasons why her team was so successful: "[Our coaches] did a good job recruiting. Even if you're a top athlete, [Coach] is not going to invite you to the team or recruit you if she doesn't think that you're going to mesh well with the girls."

Coastal U's rowing team was overwhelmingly White and middle-class, which likely improved Noelle's odds for being recruited, since she had little athletic merit. Subjective measures like team cohesion allow those with knowledge of how to navigate the system to actively pursue rowing and modify their behavior accordingly. In the final phase of overt reproduction, access is further restricted to those who can draw on social relationships that speak to their ability to "mesh well" with certain programs.

#### *Overt Selection: "Making a Call" to Gain Access*

My findings identified a new and final phase of reproduction, overt selection, which is the least accessible version of athletic recruiting. Overt practices refer to explicit collaboration between institutional actors across high school and college levels that secures access for certain students. The term *overt* captures the intentional action to favor athletes of particular backgrounds, even those with little to no athletic experience in the sport. Yet these practices are still related to the "hidden" aspect of curriculum because they are not readily available, do not align to advantage certain groups, and are disguised from the public. In my study, none of the lower-class participants accessed athletic recruiting through overt practices. Two of those practices are coach recommendations and the postgraduate year.

Findings show that high school coaches leveraged their personal and professional relationships with college coaches to facilitate access for their student-athletes. Participants' interpretations of the work coaches did on their behalf

to enhance recruitment include eight who believed their coach “made a call” on their behalf and asked that they be admitted to Coastal U and nine who said that their coach’s reputation got them admitted.

Kalie, a White middle-class woman, is one example of how a high school coach can play a role in recruitment. When, after her parents paid for a cross-country college tour that included meeting rowing coaches at numerous programs, Kalie still was not recruited to a top program, her high school coach stepped in and used his personal connections with the Coastal U coaches and his record of producing college-level athletes: “A lot of [getting recruited] to [Coastal U] was Coach’s recommendation—that was huge. Especially as a coxswain. A coach being able to say, ‘Hey, this girl is doing a good job,’ I think is a big deal.”

Kalie’s coach could offer an endorsement because the NCAA does not limit contacts between high school and college coaches. The relationships between high school and college coaches is so fluid that they can even work together over the summer. In fact, several rowers’ high school coaches worked with Coastal U’s college coaches on the US National Team. This is how it worked for Laura, a White upper-middle-class woman, who noted, “That’s probably how I ended up at [Coastal U], because I met [the Coastal U coach] at [Junior Nationals] and he was like, ‘You should come to [Coastal U].’” Laura’s additional access came at a price, however. The Junior National Team is not free. Athletes must pay tryout fees, camp dues, and all travel, food, and lodging fees associated with participation (USRowing, 2018). While USRowing does not list the total costs, athletes who participated on the Junior National Team estimated their costs at roughly \$5,000 per year.

Findings show how a second overt practice allowed those with means to delay college matriculation to improve their athletic ability or chances for recruitment. Four international students took a gap year after high school to spend a year rowing for a private club. For American students, an increasingly more common route is taking a postgraduate (PG) year, an additional year of high school at a boarding school (Fisher, 2014; Lewin, 2000; White, 2009). Goose, a White middle-class man, was one of the participants who had opted for a PG.

Growing up in a southwestern town of only a thousand people, Goose had attended a very small high school (so small it only had one hallway), where he lettered in football, baseball, and basketball (his team winning the state championship). However, no football, baseball, or basketball programs recruited him. Goose admitted that he lacked the academic “chops” to attend a reputable university without sports. But he “dreamed bigger” than most of his high school classmates and wanted more for himself than simply becoming an “insurance salesman” who “worked in a cubicle.” His great-uncle, who lived on the East Coast, had attended a boarding school decades earlier and knew that a PG experience could improve students’ college résumés and recommended

that Goose look into it. After an East Coast makeover (which included a fitting for a tailored suit) and an in-person interview at the boarding school, Goose received a generous financial aid package and an opportunity to go to a prep school attended by America's wealthiest and best-connected progeny. (Goose believed the boarding school showed leniency in admitting him because he agreed to play sports.) And it didn't take long for Goose's height and athleticism to catch the eye of the school's rowing coach, who convinced him to stop playing football and join the rowing team, as crew sent more students to top colleges than football did. Goose had not even rowed his first stroke when he visited Coastal U. He believed the reputations of both his boarding school and his coach gained him access to Coastal U despite his lack of athletic experience: "My coach—his family is big into rowing. The [Ivy League] coaches and [Coastal U] coaches know him . . . So he was the reason I got recruited. It wasn't any amazing erg score."

While Goose's narrative may seem extreme, elements of his experience resonated across the study. Stella and Noelle also had little to no rowing experience and used their coaches' recommendations to gain spots at Coastal U. Yet only a select group accessed overt selection. Of the nine Black and three lower-class participants (two of whom were White), none made it to this phase in the reproduction process. Instead, they gained admission to college athletics relying on the first phase, socialization, and overperforming in their athletic ability. Thus, as the exceptions to the reproduction process, they become the visible representations of a fair athletic recruiting process.

Chantae, the one Black and lower-class participant, had to athletically overperform and place her family in economic jeopardy to be recruited. She grew up in a racially segregated farming community. Her part of town lacked public parks, infrastructure, or community impetus for sports participation. She joined track in sixth grade because, she said, "I came from a bad neighborhood so just trying to keep us doing positive things that we actually enjoy, rather than just being out on the streets." By middle school Chantae began attending regional meets, and there she saw the elaborate financial and social support systems her competitors utilized. She realized her high school lacked the resources to prepare her for athletic recruitment. Chantae begged her mother and grandfather to hire a private coach, but their inconsistent income meant she missed private lessons some weeks, several costly high-profile meets, and certain sports camps. But, ultimately, Chantae's private coach improved her technical ability enough so that she became a state- and nationally ranked jumper. She had to reach such heights in order to receive recruiting offers from colleges.

Chantae and the other lower-class or Black participants became visible representations of athletic merit: performing at objectively athletically high levels and gaining the attention of college coaches across the country. But their stories do not reflect the majority of participants in this study. Instead, their

athletic achievement obscures how the hidden curriculum favors athletes with particular knowledge sets, social connections, behaviors, and economic capital needed to invest in athletic recruitment.

## Conclusion

The study's findings illuminate how predominately White and middle-class athletes are socialized to enact behaviors that earn them greater access to college via sports. Specifically, my study's findings reveal a hidden college athletic curriculum with subjective selection criteria that favor the socialization and socioeconomic advantages associated with White and middle-class athletes. The findings also show that reproduction may be hidden from public view but requires active labor on the part of dominant groups to retain power relationships.

While the study centered on an elite university, athletes interacted with a range of public, private, and lower-ranked colleges, suggesting that these practices may be widespread across higher education. By uncovering the hidden curriculum of college athletic recruiting, this work demonstrates one way higher education reproduces existing power structures through an obscure and unequal selection and recruitment process. In doing so, the findings highlight how college selection processes could become more transparent and, in turn, how college access could become more equitable.

The findings are limited by the study's methodology. The vantage point is one of "success stories," of those athletes who were recruited. Different insights may emerge by investigating athletes who were weeded out or excluded from college athletic recruitment. Also, the study centered student-athletes and therefore did not capture the vantage point of socializers or recruiters. Findings could be enriched by examining how high school and college coaches perceive, enact, and shape the recruiting process.

Despite these limitations, the study has several implications for university policy and practice. If universities value athletics for providing a well-rounded cohort and college experience (Clotfelter, 2011; Schulman & Bowen, 2001), then they should develop uniform and transparent selection criteria and regulations for athletic recruiting. To do so, universities should engage in critical dialogue and reflection to reexamine biases in their existing selection practices. In addition, change could come at the national level. The NCAA could lift restrictions on the number of official university visits and could also regulate the number, means, and interactions attached to unofficial campus visit. Finally, future research and reform should examine the entire pipeline of sport access—elementary, middle, and secondary school opportunities for athletics—and the ways in which aspiring athletes are coached to successfully navigate college admission.

## Notes

1. Names of places and people are pseudonyms.
2. Two notable exceptions are Margolis and Romero (1998) and Wooten (2017).
3. I created participants' class categories by contextualizing their self-identification through several follow-up questions. During the interview protocol I asked participations to describe their neighborhood and school, their caregiver's educational level, their extracurricular activities, and whether their family needed them to supplement the household income. I also used US Census Bureau (2016) data related to their community characteristics to further contextualize their self-identification.

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