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MISSION STATEMENT

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Strategically reimagine how teaching and learning can look across preK-20 educational settings.

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Pray and Play: The Impact of Fellowship of Christian Athletes on Spiritual Development, Belonging, and Coping for African American Collegiate Football Players
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Abstract

Holistic student-athlete development traditionally emphasizes academic, social, and physical domains, while spiritual development remains comparatively understudied. African American football student-athletes (AAFSAs) navigate complex identity intersections that may heighten the importance of spiritual meaning-making and coping resources. This study examines Division I African American football players' perceptions of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and its influence on spiritual development, belonging, and coping. Grounded in Fowler's and Parks' Faith Development Theory, an exploratory mixed-method survey was administered to AAFSAs in Kentucky. Findings suggest that FCA fosters relational belonging, facilitates integration of faith and athletic identity, and supports positive religious coping strategies. Implications for higher education professionals and athletic departments are discussed. Pray and Play: The Impact of Fellowship of Christian Athletes on Spiritual Development, Belonging, and Coping for African American Collegiate Football Players.

Pray and Play: The Impact of Fellowship of Christian Athletes on Spiritual Development, Belonging, and Coping for African American Collegiate Football Players

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Higher education historian John Thelin said, “Nothing compares to the U.S. institution's commitment to college sports. No other university system relies so heavily on athletics as an integral part of its functions” (personal communication, September 24, 2021). Among those collegiate sports, very few match the notoriety and prestige of Division I (DI) intercollegiate football. In 2019, regular-season telecasts on major networks averaged 1,839,000 viewers per game, reaching more than 145 million unique fans **(**National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame, 2020). The top ten DI revenue producers each created at least $100 million in football revenue, twice the amount of the number one revenue producer for college basketball (College Raptor, n.d.).

Research maintains that participation in athletics enhances both learning and character development, including leadership, interpersonal skills, social self-esteem, discipline, personal health, motivation, dedication, and life lessons (Aries & Richards, 1999; Astin, 1993; Childs, 1987; Hirko, 2009; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shulman & Bowen, 2002). Athletics support the holistic development of student-athletes by teaching physical, mental, and psychological skills, building a strong sense of self, and providing access to social groups through teams (Aries & Richards, 1999; Brewer et al., 1993; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Washington, 2016).

An often-neglected portion of holistic development in student-athletes is spirituality (Flowers, 2022). Spiritual development is vital for student-athletes; literature has supported that student-athletes who are growing in their faith may be better equipped to navigate the tension of multiple identity roles and cope with various circumstances (Clarke, 2010; Epting, 2013; Flowers, 2020, 2022; Knabb & Grigorian-Routon, 2014; Ramsey, 2015; Sceggel, 2018). Studies have highlighted the many challenges that African American student-athletes face, including stereotyping, discrimination, first-generation status, low-socioeconomic background, and being a highly solicited scholarship athlete (Ramsey, 2015; Fuller et al., 2017; Singer, 2018). Moreover, some struggle to have a sense of belonging at their institutions—predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in particular (Ramsey, 2015; Singer, 2018).

Recognizing that sport carries great cultural significance in the United States and the world, evangelical Christians have formed organizations combining sport and Christianity since the 1950s (Blakeney-Glazer, 2008). Today, over 90 sports ministry organizations exist in the United States, working with nearly every sport and all ages, from youth to professional. These organizations work to align people from different spiritual interest levels and backgrounds (White, 2005). According to White,

"the sports ministry is a fun and non-threatening way to get people plugged into the life of the church" (p. 114).

Matters surrounding African American male college athletes attending DI colleges have been the topic of interest among academic scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and sports enthusiasts (Cooper, 2016; Comeaux, 2018; Singer, 2018; Howe, 2020). Yet minimal research combines the influence of religious faith, particularly Christianity, amongst African American collegiate male athletes (Flowers, 2022). Due to the historic impact Christianity has had on higher education, athletics, and the African American community, Christian spiritual development through interactions with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) serves as the focus of this study. Therefore, this study examines the perceptions of African American DI football student-athletes regarding the FCA and its role in facilitating spiritual development, belonging, and coping.

Theoretical Framework: Faith Development Theory

Since its founding in 1954, the FCA has sought to "use the powerful platform of sport to reach every coach and every athlete with the transforming power of Jesus Christ" (FCA, 2020). Through its "E3" model—engage, equip, and empower—FCA emphasizes relational connection, spiritual formation, and leadership development. Its mission and methods position spirituality as a central dimension of student-athlete development (Flowers, 2022; Parks, 2000; Ramsey, 2015).

Although scholarship on spiritual development has largely focused on traditional college students (ages 18–25), comparatively little research has examined how spirituality shapes the experiences of collegiate student-athletes. Existing studies that do address spirituality in athletics frequently draw upon Fowler's and Parks's Faith Development Theory to examine identity formation and meaning-making processes (Clarke, 2010; Epting, 2013; Flowers, 2020, 2022; Ramsey, 2015; Sceggel, 2018).

Fowler (1995) conceptualizes faith development as a staged process through which individuals assume increasing responsibility for their beliefs and meaning structures. Of particular relevance to college-aged populations is Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith), in which individuals critically examine inherited beliefs and integrate faith into emerging personal identity. Parks (2000) extends this framework by emphasizing the developmental significance of young adulthood, a period marked by exploration of purpose, trust, and meaning.

Faith Development Theory provides a lens for understanding how African American DI football student-athletes negotiate intersecting racial, athletic, and spiritual identities while using faith as a coping resource. Given that young adulthood is characterized by identity exploration and authenticity-seeking (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Parks, 2000), this framework is particularly suited to examining how spirituality informs student-athletes' experiences both on and off the field.

Literature Review

Spirituality in Higher Education

It is crucial to begin the discussion of spirituality by delineating it from religion. Rather than view religion and spirituality as distinct, it is beneficial to recognize the ways in which they overlap. As

outlined by Astin (2004), *spirituality* is:

> The values we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and the world around us. (p. 1)

Parks's definition of faith aligns with spirituality, through which one endeavors to make sense of the self and the external world (2000). Spirituality is a form of personal commitment to inward development, thus affecting a person entirely (Chickering, 2005; Gardner, 2019).

While higher education's roots are religious, the primary inquiry of the past 4 decades is how students adopt and integrate spiritual development into the context of their academic learning and their lives (Dungy, 2003). Collectively, this body of research demonstrates that spirituality contributes to meaning making, identity formation, and psychosocial development during college. However, most studies focus on the general student population rather than subgroups with distinct developmental pressures, such as DI athletes (Astin, 2004; Astin et al., 2011; Bacon, 2008; Buley-Meissner et al., 2000; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Sceggel, 2018; Schwartz, 2001; UCLA, 2006). Alexander Astin, one of the leading researchers in spirituality and spiritual development in higher education, revealed that students yearning to engage in the spiritual quest and to resolve the inquiries of who they are and what they value grow deeply and significantly during the college years (Astin et al., 2011). During the first 3 years of college, students exhibit increases in spiritual quest, or searching for meaning and purpose in life (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Existing research underscores the need for higher education professionals to "recognize the changing forms of college student spirituality today and to deepen their resources, understanding, and commitment to spiritual growth as an important aspect of their mission to promote students' holistic development" (Dalton et al., 2006, p. 16). Complementing this perspective, Jenney (2010) found that spirituality contributes significantly to students' life direction, goal formation, and the development of a coherent philosophy of life. These outcomes were particularly evident in students' engagement with spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and religious music, which provided structured opportunities for reflection and meaning making. Collectively, this body of research positions spirituality as a meaningful component of holistic student development, particularly in shaping identity, purpose, and relational engagement during the college years. However, less attention has been devoted to how these developmental processes operate within specific subpopulations, including collegiate student-athletes.

Spirituality in Collegiate Athletics

While spirituality has been widely examined within general college populations, its role within intercollegiate athletics has received comparatively less scholarly attention. In regard to intercollegiate athletics, Dillon's and Tait's (2000) study was the first to investigate the relationship between spirituality and being in a positive state of consciousness. This positive state of consciousness was operationalized as being in the "zone." In a Division III setting, applying two scales, the Zone Test (ZT) and the Spirituality in Sports Tests (SIST), athletes were asked about spirituality in sport compared to being in the zone for different team sport situations. The study concluded that greater spiritual engagement in

sports was associated with being in the zone. Clarke (2010) studied student-athletes from a National Collegiate Athletic Association DI institution using Astin's (2004) College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV) to identify student-athletes' levels of spirituality. These student-athletes reported higher mean scores on half of the CSBV subscales. Epting (2013) concentrated on Christian faith development among DI football players, creating the Student-Athlete Christian Faith Interview Guide to measure development. Through a phenomenological approach, Epting identified four overarching themes: Christian faith experiences, relationships, football environmental characteristics, and Christian faith changes and beliefs. Blakeney-Glazer's (2008) research focused on Christian athletes and how they were able to use their athletic experiences and the structures of sport to affirm Christian beliefs and identities, concluding that these attributes aided athletes in the ability to play through exhaustion, remain composed under pressure, deal with loss and injuries, and cultivate a perspective through which their self-worth was not determined by their athletic performance. These studies suggest that spirituality may function as a mechanism for identity integration, resilience, and meaning making within competitive sport environments.

Spirituality and African American Male Collegiate Students

Many decades ago, the United States institutionalized racial segregation in educational practices and procedures, thus furthering inequitable outcomes and marginalizing people of color (Stephens, 2019). Though colleges had a formal policy of racial inclusion, it was an intentional, covert practice to exclude African Americans (Allen et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2009; Thelin, 2011). After World War II (1945–1980), higher education underwent fundamental changes, which helped to create the modern system exhibited today. During this period, government involvement in higher education practice and policy was amplified, as evidenced by the instigation of the Truman and Danforth reports and the Civil Rights Movement (Stephens, 2019). In the United States, higher education institutions (HEIs) were fundamental for the upward mobility of African Americans with newly gained freedoms and rights. Nevertheless, degrees of residue exist from the historical foundation that continues to permeate America's contemporary higher education landscape through systemic and structural barriers that remain for African Americans (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Research identifies many challenges facing the African American male undergraduate population, including racism, crime, and a lack of educational role models and mentors (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Shipp, 2017; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Other daily obstacles include retention difficulties, tense campus climates, and a lack of financial resources (Avent Harris & Wong, 2018; Hunn, 2014; Owens et al., 2010; Rice, 2012). Although many campus programs have been developed to alleviate some of these challenges, several fail to help African American males understand their identity and purpose. Spirituality plays a key role in understanding and facilitating identity development (Flowers, 2022). These structural realities intensify identity negotiation processes for African American male students, particularly at PWIs.

Historically, religious faith has been an important part of the African American community. Religion and spirituality serve as major guiding sources in the lives of African Americans (Love, 2010; Salsman & Carlson, 2005). Research findings indicate that African Americans rely on religion and

spirituality as a source of hope, liberation, and material/emotional support (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2008; Newlin et al., 2002; Spencer et al., 2003; Watt, 2003). Specifically, Christianity has played an immense role in African American history (Masci, 2018). Although Christianity was often wielded as a tool for abuse and mistreatment by slave captors, Christianity provided enslaved Africans with a sense of solidarity, social cohesion, and social bonds (Frazier, 1966; Love, 2010). Today, religious, spiritual, and communal values are reflected in the context of many African Americans' daily activities and lives (Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Research confirms that African American college students are likelier to believe in God, pray, and attend religious services (Bartlett, 2005; Sanchez & Gilbert, 2016). African American college students also tend to use religion and spiritual practices as coping mechanisms more often than their White peers (Baldwin et al., 2003; Herndon, 2003; Jackson, 1998).

African American males and other students in college often struggle to understand who they truly are. Identity plays a crucial role in the collegiate journey for African American male students. Spirituality and religious engagement have been shown to be essential elements in helping with identity development, especially considering the intersectionality of multiple identities, chiefly racial identity (Flowers, 2022; Rice, 2012; Stewart, 2008, 2010; Watt, 2003). How students develop identity is closely related to their spirituality and purpose in life (Fowler, 1995; Parks, 2000). Constantine et al. revealed that religion and spirituality served as critical buffers against the challenges many participants encountered while pursuing their career goals and aspirations at a PWI. Mainly, engaging in spiritual disciplines alleviated some of the related stressors (2002). As African American male college students explore various worldviews, spirituality remains a means of support, identity, and coping when confronted with academic and nonacademic challenges (Flowers, 2022; Shipp, 2017; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). In this context, spirituality operates not solely as personal belief but also as a psychosocial resource that supports resilience, identity affirmation, and emotional regulation.

Sports Ministry Organizations and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Today, over 90 sports ministry organizations (SMOs) exist in the United States. While evangelism is the central mission of SMOs, Blakeney-Glazer (2008) explains that SMOs' most evident function is fostering communities built on affirming believers' sense of Christian belonging, addressing everyday concerns of Christian athletes as they attempt to combine Christian and athletic identities. Shin (2010) argues that SMOs have made a pedagogical shift to teaching life skills through sport. SMOs are effective at HEIs because student-athletes' lives in sports present obstacles to their involvement in ministry events more often than the general student population (Flowers, 2022; Lipe, 2015). SMOs fully embrace the sports culture, using it to understand where individuals are, build relationships, and foster growth while aligning with student-athletes' schedules.

Don McClanen founded the FCA in 1954 (Fellowship of Christian Athletes, 2020). The E3 method (engage, equip, and empower) entails engaging relationally by connecting with individuals, building genuine trust, and sharing life together (see Table 1). Equipping means providing training, events, resources, and ongoing support to help athletes grow and apply their faith to all parts of their lives. Empowering means enabling faithful leaders who desire to use their time, talents, and treasures to

help other coaches and athletes grow in their faith and share it with others. Since its origin, FCA has served hundreds of HEIs. FCA's methods and values clarify that spirituality is crucial to student-athletes' lives and that the spiritual quest is integral to the developmental process (Flowers, 2022; Parks, 2000; Ramsey, 2015). Research done by Flowers and Ramsey at DI institutions indicates FCA's potential to facilitate the development of holistic student-athletes, emphasizing their spiritual development (Flowers, 2020, 2022; Ramsey, 2015). The South, and particularly Kentucky, has a strong background in FCA. In Southern culture, there is a more considerable inclination for the Christian faith to be a part of football programs and coaches' philosophy/pedagogy (Pearce, 2020; Epting, 2013; Tweedie, 1978). Research findings show that African American males report greater use of religious coping (Anshel et al., 2010; Boyd-Franklin, 2003). FCA represents a structured organizational context through which spiritual development and coping may be facilitated within collegiate athletics (Flowers, 2022). FCA is more than a system of evangelism; it is a tool that can be used to ingrain practical applications of Christian values and biblical teachings into the lives of athletes (Blazer, 2019).

Despite substantial scholarship on the experiences of African American male college students, limited research has examined spiritual identity within this population. Much of the literature assumes a historical and affirmative relationship between athletic involvement and spiritual development (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Gardner, 2019; Krattenmaker, 2010; Parry, 2007; Pfitzner, 2009). However, prior research has not given sufficient attention to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African American male collegiate athletes or to the specific impact of the FCA or similar SMOs (Flowers, 2022). The following section outlines the methodological approach used to examine these issues.

Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional exploratory survey design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative items. Anchoring in the Faith Development Theory, this study explored student-athletes' perceptions of managing ongoing conflict between role identities, faith as a coping mechanism, and spiritual development facilitated through the FCA. Specifically, this study was situated in Christian spiritual development. An exploratory survey was used to examine participants' perceptions of FCA and its role in spiritual development, belonging, and coping. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are their perceptions of the FCA?
2. In what ways does participation in the FCA facilitate spiritual development?
3. What factors influence participation in the FCA?
4. How is the FCA being utilized as a coping mechanism?

Survey Design

The survey instrument was adapted from Pubols (2018) and revised to reflect the FCA's E3 framework and the specific context of African American DI football student-athletes. It used the framework of Sampson et al. (2021) for survey construction and a psychometric approach to develop the instrument to capture the construct. As such, the construct was built on the idea of the impact of the FCA under the assumption that those participating were more likely to have positive experiences than negative ones.

The data collection instrument was adapted to focus on the FCA, with consideration of the sample of African American DI football players (Flowers, 2022). The foundation of the survey was centered on the FCA's E3 method (Table 1) and the FCA's primary guidance for the spiritual development of student-athletes, consisting of the following sections: a) influencing factors in participation, b) perceptions of the FCA, c) the FCA's role in coping, d) FCA spiritual development, and e) demographics. Four-point Likert-style items (*strongly agree, agree*, etc.) were designed to provide closed-ended responses. Open-ended items were used to acquire information from the participating student-athletes regarding their perceptions and experiences of the FCA, specifically related to racial identity. The survey went through several revisions, including an expert panel review. This process enhanced content validity by ensuring alignment between survey items, research questions, and the conceptual framework guiding the study. Through this process, the questions and content of the respective instruments were refined, enhancing the overall quality. The qualitative inquiries were reviewed by discussing emergent theory and coding themes with the research team. The survey matrix is presented below. The final survey was distributed via Qualtrics through email distribution.

Table 1

Survey Question Matrix

Research Question A	Research Question B	Research Question C	Research Question D
Q6: FCA has helped me connect with teammates and/or other student-athletes. **Q7:** As an African American male, I felt/feel welcomed at FCA by other participants (Please give a brief description with your answer.) **Q8:** As an African American male, I felt/feel welcomed at FCA by the FCA staff and/or chaplain (Please give a brief description with your answer.) **Q9:** I have developed a relationship with the	**Q16:** FCA has helped me to grow in my understanding of the Bible. **Q17:** FCA has equipped me to integrate my faith into my sport. **Q18:** FCA has empowered me to use my time, talents, and treasures to help my teammates grow in their faith. **Q19:** FCA has empowered me to use my time, talents, and treasures to help others grow in their faith. **Q20:** FCA has encouraged me to share faith with my teammates.	**Q5:** Why did you decide to participate in FCA?	**Q24:** FCA helps me deal with life's challenges (injuries, loss, tragedy, etc.). **Q25:** FCA supported me during life's challenges (injuries, loss, tragedy, etc.) Please give a brief description with your answer. **Q26:** Rate the extent to which FCA does or does not contribute to your response to dealing with life's challenges: -Believing that God is in control of the situation -Processing my feelings/emotions with God

FCA staff and/or chaplain. **Q10:** I trust the FCA staff and/or chaplain. **Q11:** Is there an FCA staff and/or chaplain at your institution that looks like you? (Please give a brief description with your answer.) **Q12:** It is important to have an FCA staff and/or chaplain that looks like me (Please give a brief description with your answer.) **Q13:** The FCA staff and/or chaplain are available for support for things I need. **Q14:** The FCA staff and/or chaplain have shared their life with me by: (select all that apply). **Q15:** FCA has provided support in navigating my faith as an African American. **Q27:** In what ways does FCA serve your needs as an African American football student-athlete? [open-ended response] **Q28:** In what ways can FCA better serve your needs as an as an African American	**Q21:** FCA has encouraged me to share faith with others. **Q22:** Because of FCA, I feel confident to share my faith with teammates. **Q23:** Because of FCA, I feel confident to share my faith with others. **Q30:** Which statement best characterizes you before your first semester of involvement with your current FCA? (Check one) **Q31:** Which statement best characterizes you currently? (Check one) **Q32:** An athlete can worship God within their sport. Before FCA: Currently: **Q33:** An athlete can glorify God in losing as in winning. Before FCA: Currently: **Q34:** An athlete's worth is from their athletic performance. Before FCA: Currently: **Q35:** Sport is a medium through which an athlete's relationship with God is developed. Before FCA: Currently: **Q36:** An athlete grows spiritually by reading the Bible and praying.		-Processing my feelings/emotions with others -Using spiritual practices (prayer, meditation, scripture reading, etc.) -Believing there is a greater purpose behind the situation -Relying on God's help -Focusing on faith rather than the situation

football student-athlete? [open-ended response] **Q41:** How does your identity as an African American inform your perceptions on FCA? [open-ended response]	Before FCA: Currently: **Q37:** An athlete grows spiritually by being involved in Christian community. Before FCA: Currently: **Q38:** An athlete grows spiritually by helping others. Before FCA: Currently: **Q39:** An athlete grows spiritually through suffering. Before FCA: Currently: **Q40:** What has FCA's role been in your spiritual development? [open-ended]		

Note. The colors indicate how each question addresses the FCA's E3 method.
Purple = Engage; Green = Equip; Orange = Empower

Sampling

The sample for this study involved DI institutions in Kentucky, with a primary focus on their football programs. Among the eight DI institutions in the state, three belong to the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and another three to the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) while two do not support football. Participants were eligible if they were members of a DI varsity football program in Kentucky, had participated in the FCA for at least one semester, were between 18 and 25 years of age, and identified as Black or of African descent. Access to participants was facilitated through contact with FCA staff members and/or chaplains at the institutions alongside social media promotion for expediency.

To ensure confidentiality, participants were not prompted to share their names and participation was voluntary. As an incentive, a chance to win one of five Amazon gift cards was offered through a separate sign-up process after survey completion. The study's focus aligns with DI institutions in Kentucky, particularly their football programs, encompassing FBS and FCS categories as well as institutions situated within the culturally significant “Bible Belt” of the United States (Epting, 2013; Flowers, 2020, 2022; Tweedie, 1978). The research targets individuals ages 18–25, of Black or African descent, actively participating in DI varsity football programs in Kentucky, and having engaged with the FCA for at least one semester.

Data Collection

Multiple sampling methods were employed to gather participants for this study. A purposive selection process was used to identify individuals who could offer valuable insights into the research objectives (Merriam, 2009). Convenience sampling was also employed due to practical constraints, and snowball sampling was utilized, where initial participants were encouraged to refer teammates to join the study. With an estimated 10% participation rate among the relevant demographic within the targeted population of African American DI football student-athletes in Kentucky, the resulting sample reflects a meaningful proportion of the accessible population and is consistent with exploratory research designs focusing on specific subgroups. The Institutional Review Board approved the study, and access to participants was established through FCA staff members and chaplains at the institutions. Qualtrics, a data collection platform, hosted the survey, ensuring participant privacy and data security. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their ability to withdraw without consequences. Confidentiality was maintained through the omission of personal names while email addresses, if provided, were stored separately to avoid linkage with survey responses. Only the researcher had access to the collected data and email addresses.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses, including means, standard deviations, and response frequencies, were generated using Qualtrics. Qualitative responses were analyzed using open and axial coding procedures to identify recurring patterns and themes. Codes were compared across responses to establish thematic consistency. The coded data were compared to identify similarities and differences and create themes. The themes generated capture the essence of participants' lived experiences of meaning making in spiritual development through their FCA experiences.

Validity and Reliability

In this study, a combination of quantitative survey methods and qualitative inquiries were used to enhance evidence credibility. This approach facilitated a diverse data collection, bolstering the validity of conclusions drawn (Butin, 2010; Peters, 2021). Methodological triangulation strengthened credibility by integrating quantitative and qualitative data (Bryman, 2006). Content validity was supported through expert panel review (Weight et al., 2014), and qualitative trustworthiness was enhanced through iterative coding and peer discussion (Collins, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). Validity, a crucial research concept, demands that measurements align with research intentions (Cadungug, 2016; Yin, 2011). To ensure validity, the study encompassed content validity, exploring dimensions of spiritual development via the FCA's E3 method. Construct validity was achieved through comprehensive coverage of factors influencing participation, perceptions of the FCA, and spiritual development. Expert review, modeled after Weight et al., refined the survey via input from a panel of specialists (2014). Qualitative inquiries underwent scrutiny by the dissertation committee, enhancing the reliability and validity through rigorous analysis (Collins, 2019; Flowers, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). The results of these analyses are presented in the following section.

Results

Responses consisted of 22 African American football student-athletes (AAFSAs) from five DI HEIs in Kentucky. The University of Kentucky reported the most participants (6), the highest mean age of participants (22.33 years old), with no participants identifying as an underclassman (freshman or sophomore), and the highest mean length of time participating in the FCA (5 semesters). Eastern Kentucky and Murray State University recorded the lowest mean ages for participants (20.4 years old and 19.66 years old) with six of the participants from these institutions being underclassmen. A summary of key demographics is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Institution	Year in School (*n*)	Mean Age	Mean length of time participating in FCA	Mean length of time participating in football
University of Kentucky	Senior: 2 5th year senior: 3 2021 graduate: 1 Total: 6	22.33 years old	5 semesters	3.5 seasons
University of Louisville	Sophomore: 2 Senior: 1 6th year senior: 1 Total: 4	21.25 years old	4 semesters	2.5 seasons
Eastern Kentucky University	Freshman: 2 Junior: 2 5th year senior: 1 Total: 5	20.4 years old	2.8 semesters	1.8 seasons
Western Kentucky University	6th year senior: 1 Graduate students: 2 Total: 4	23 years old	4 semesters	4.6 seasons
Murray State University	Freshman: 1 Sophomore: 1 Graduate students: 1 Total: 3	19.66 years old	3 semesters	1.3 seasons

Perceptions of the FCA

With respect to *RQ1* (*What are AAFSAs perceptions of FCA?*), items aligned with the FCA's E3 method of "engage, equip, and empower" were analyzed. Engaging is connecting relationally with individuals through building genuine trust and sharing life together (see Table 3).

Table 3

RQ1 Survey

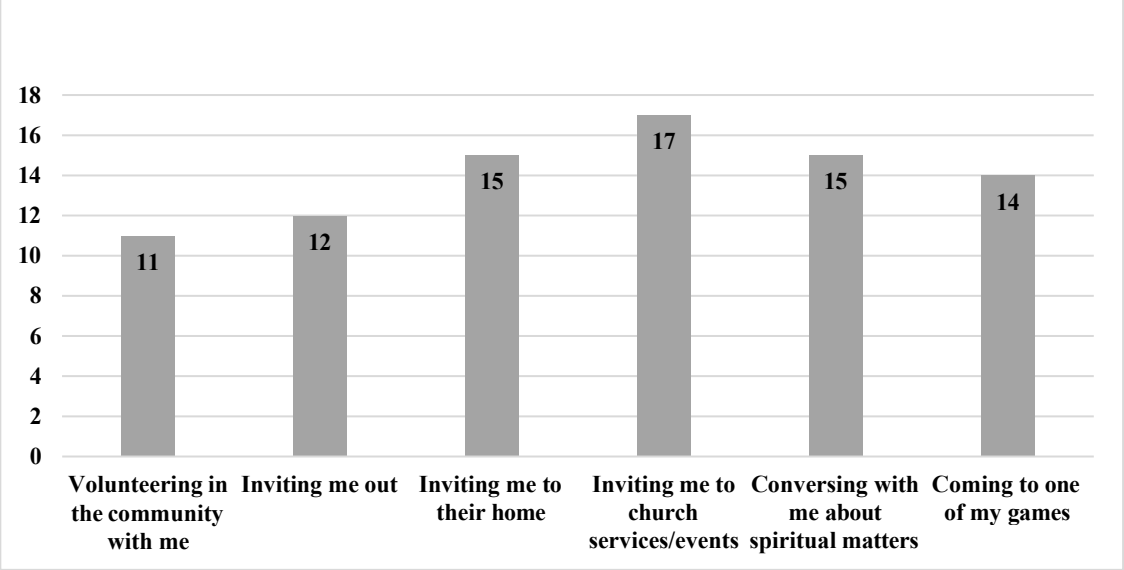
	Response % (*N*)			
Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q7: As an African American male, I feel welcomed at FCA by other participants (Please give a brief description with your answer.)	10% (2)	5% (1)	33% (7)	52% (11)
Q6: FCA has helped me connect with teammates and/or other student-athletes.	5% (1)	9% (2)	41% (9)	45% (10)
Q8: As an African American male, I felt/feel welcomed at FCA by the FCA staff and/or chaplain (Please give a brief description with your answer.)	9% (2)	-	18% (4)	73% (16)
Q9: I have developed a relationship with the FCA staff and/or chaplain.	5% (1)	-	-	95% (21)
Q10: I trust the FCA staff and/or chaplain.	-	-	27% (6)	73% (16)
Q13: The FCA staff and/or chaplain are available for support for things I need.	-	5% (1)	32% (7)	64% (14)
Q15: FCA has provided ongoing support in navigating my faith as an African American.	5% (1)	9% (2)	41% (9)	45% (10)

Participants predominantly indicated that they feel welcomed at the FCA by others and have generated connections with others, with slight disagreements. They also reported that the FCA has

helped them connect with teammates and/or other student-athletes, with 86% responding with *agree* or *strongly agree* (*Q6*). It was clear they felt welcomed by the FCA staff member and/or chaplain and established a level of trust and comfort with them (*Q8* and *Q9*). Additionally, the survey addressed the support offered by the FCA staff member and/or chaplain (*Q13)*. Participants strongly agreed 64% of the time and agreed 32% of the time that the chaplain was available for any support. Aside from providing support, participants were asked to think about the ways that the FCA staff member and/or chaplain lived out an organic relationship with them outside of the context of FCA meetings (*Q14)*—see Figure 1. The most prevalent way the FCA staff member and/or chaplain did so was by inviting them to church or other services/events outside of the FCA meetings.

Figure 1

Activities with FCA Staff Member and/or



Themes from participant responses emerged from the data yielded by open-ended questions, such as: *In what ways does FCA serve your needs as an African American football student-athlete?* The researchers conceptualize belonging as a feeling of inclusivity in "community" or a participant describing the group as supportive or a place that supports/promotes their beliefs. The FCA acted as a place that provided a *belonging community*; respondents reported it being a space where they experience belonging. Additionally, it is a space where participants can meet with other student-athletes in and outside of their sport who are also striving to grow in the Christian faith. Participants said:

"FCA is a place amongst other athletes where we pursue God."

"Providing a team of like-minded individuals who can support me if I am in need."

"It kind of gives me a sense of belonging and another group to relate to."

"It provides a different community of believers outside my sport."

SMOs fully embrace the sports culture, using it to get to know individuals where they are, develop relationships, and create growth while fitting student-athletes' schedules. One athlete shared: "[FCA] was a positive way to escape the workload of being an athlete. FCA provides a moment to

realize how cool we all different grinds in our sport but interact as one under prayer and faith."

Another theme was *developing faith*. Participants acknowledged that the FCA provided opportunities to grow in Christian spiritual development through a deepening faith in God. Participants stated:

> "FCA helps keep my faith in God strong."
>
> "It helped open me up more about my religion, and I knew I wasn't alone, so I didn't feel uncomfortable."
>
> "For me it helped me seek faith in myself and God, before FCA I didn't really go to church or even read strictures [scriptures]. FCA has helped me participate in that."

As these AAFSAs must balance many priorities, such as academics, athletics, and social life, the FCA provided the space to still seek community and develop spiritually. One student-athlete wrote, "I believe FCA helps my needs through reaching out and helping me navigate my spiritual life with my rigorous schedule."

The way in which racial identity impacted perceptions of FCA was also explored. While some participants indicated that racial identity had no impact, others shared a significant impact, stating that FCA "allows me to see people that are like me involved with their community spiritually" and "makes me value it more than ever, I've experienced first-hand how this organization cares for their athletes and staff. I trust in them completely."

For these participants, seeing other people that looked like them was impactful. Seeing that the FCA cared specifically about their racial identity and meeting their needs based on that was also noteworthy. While many participants indicated that the FCA is already doing a good job of meeting their needs as AAFSAs, many participants expressed a genuine desire to see more participants who look like them and an FCA staff member and/or chaplain who reflects their racial identity. Participants widely agreed that the FCA produced opportunities to grow in Christian spiritual development through a deepening faith in God. Though many participants indicated they feel welcomed at the FCA *(Q7, Q8)*, participants observed areas for improvement in African American student-athlete involvement and representation of FCA staff members and/or chaplains.

Spiritual Development Outcomes

Looking at how participation in the FCA facilitates spiritual development, the researchers explored the second and third terms in the FCA's E3 method: *equip* and *empower*. *Equipping* means providing training, events, resources, and ongoing support to help athletes grow and apply their faith to all parts of their lives. *Empower* means enabling faithful leaders who desire to use their time, talents, and treasures to help others grow in their faith and share it with others. A summary is presented in Table 4.

By employing teaching and application from the Bible, the FCA believes the athlete may be able to integrate their faith into how they participate in sport. Every participant agreed, with 41% of those responses strongly agreeing, that they grew in understanding the Bible *(Q16)*. Participants were asked about the extent to which the FCA helped them integrate their Christianity and sport *(Q17)*. Correspondingly, every single participant agreed, with 59% of those responses being *strongly agree*. *Q18 and Q19* pertained to the FCA's ability to empower participants to use their time, talents, and

treasures to share their faith and help teammates and other individuals grow in their faith. Respondents indicated feeling more empowered and encouraged to help teammates grow in their faith and share their faith with teammates versus doing so with others.

Table 4

RQ2 Survey Questions and Data

	Response % (*N*)			
Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q16: FCA has helped me to grow in my understanding of the Bible.	-	-	59% (13)	41% (9)
Q17: FCA has equipped me to integrate my faith into my sport.	-	-	41% (9)	59% (13)
Q18: FCA has empowered me to use my time, talents, and treasures to help my teammates grow in their faith.	5% (2)	-	45% (10)	50% (11)
Q19: FCA has empowered me to use my time, talents, and treasures to help others grow in their faith.	5% (1)	-	55% (12)	41% (9)
	-	-	50% (11)	50% (11)
Q20: FCA has encouraged me to share faith with my teammates.	5% (1)	-	45% (10)	50% (11)
Q21: FCA has encouraged me to share faith with others.	14% (3)	-	27% (6)	59% (13)

Q22: Because of FCA, I feel confident to share my faith with my teammates.	9% (2)	27% (6)	64% (14)
Q23: Because of FCA, I feel confident to share my faith with others.			

Regarding *Christian faith status*, most participants indicated that they were already a part of the Christian faith before participating in the FCA. A large percentage (43%) indicated that they are currently "A Christian, but not doing much with it right now." The data represented an expected trend that those who participated in the FCA grew spiritually, as evidenced by their commitment to the Christian faith. Only one participant indicated a strong Christian faith and commitment to faith prior to the FCA, which continued as a part of their involvement in the FCA. While a few participants remained at the same level, not a single participant regressed from their faith level. These data are another marker of spiritual development.

Participants were also asked a series of related questions to indicate their beliefs/understanding about certain aspects of faith and sport prior to the FCA and their beliefs/understanding following at least one semester of participation in the FCA. For each question, the researcher gathered means for the responses (see Table 5).

Several questions posited a notable change in means, with the largest being *Growth through involvement with Christian community* (an increase of 0.43 points). Some of the most prevalent changes in means were questions related to sport. Participants viewed sport as an opportunity to worship God and an opportunity to worship by serving others. The lowest means were *worshiping God through sport* (with an increase of 0.19 points) and *suffering producing spiritual growth* (with an increase of 0.14 points). A question with particularly mixed results was that an athlete's worth is found in their performance. There appeared to be some confusion regarding this question among participants, as indicated by the high standard deviation. Nonetheless, this question is still reported as one of the more significant changes in the mean differences (with a decrease of 0.29 points), meaning that FCA influenced AAFSAs' perceptions of their athletic and spiritual identities.

Table 5

Faith and Sport Pre-FCA and Post-FCA

Question	*n*	*M* (Before/ Current)	*SD* (Before/ Current)
Q32: An athlete can worship God within their sport	21	3.57 / 3.76	0.49 / 0.43

Q33: An athlete can glorify God in losing as in winning	21	3.48 / 3.70	0.59 / 0.46
Q34: An athlete's worth is from their athletic performance	21	2.29 / 2.00	1.16 / 1.15
Q35: Sport is a medium through which one's relationship with God is developed	21	3.19 / 3.43	0.59 / 0.58
Q36: An athlete grows spiritually by reading the Bible and praying	21	3.48 / 3.71	0.59 / 0.45
Q37: An athlete grows spiritually by being involved in Christian community	21	3.24 / 3.67	0.87 / 0.64
Q38: An athlete grows spiritually by helping others	21	3.29 / 3.57	0.63 / 0.66
Q39: An athlete grows spiritually through suffering	21	3.14 / 3.33	0.83 / 0.89

Participants were asked to respond to *What has FCA's role been in your spiritual development?* Some of the participant's answers included:

> "It has helped me to understand things and get closer to God."
>
> "Being a home away from home, spiritual food for myself and a way to stay in the faith and continue to pursue God."
>
> "To push me more towards my spirituality and encourage me to be more engaged in my community."

These answers provide complementary insights into the quantitative data. Overall, these quantitative and qualitative responses reveal an indication of substantial spiritual development through

the FCA. Faith was not a separate category lived separate from football but rather amalgamated with how an athlete participated in and thought about football.

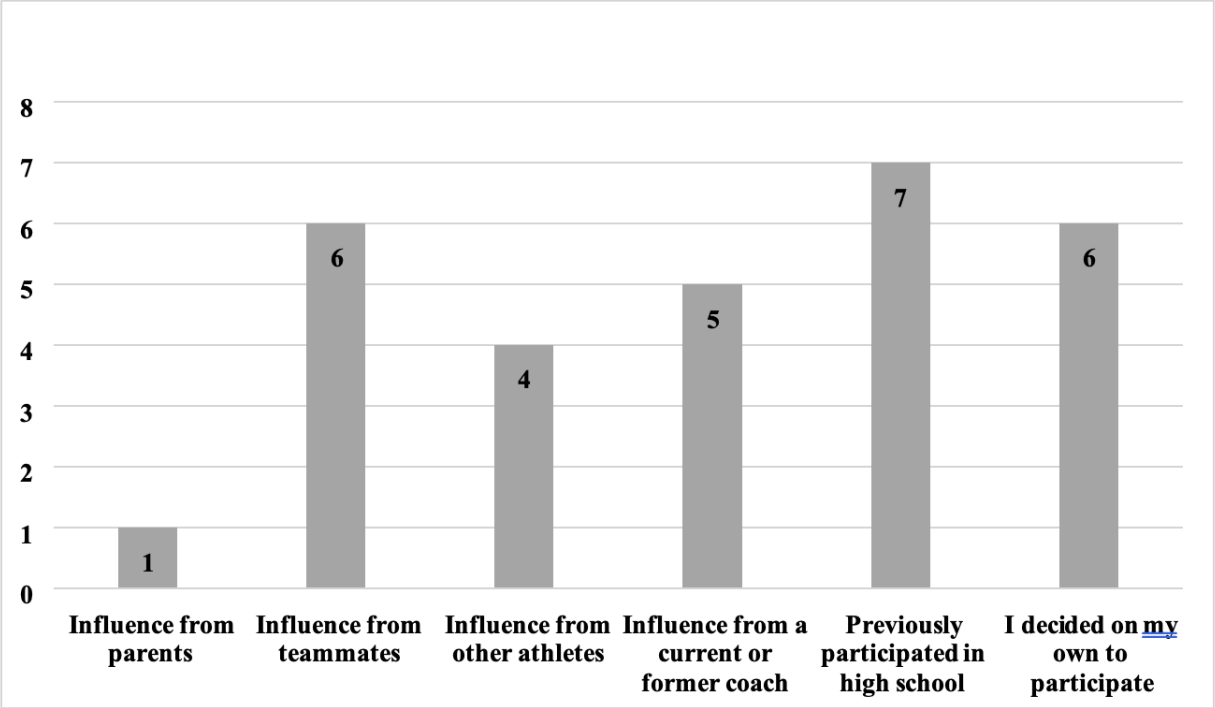
Influences on FCA Participation

In regard to what factors influence participation in the FCA, participants provided a variety of responses about their decisions to participate in the FCA. Figure 2 provides a summary.

Parental influence was the lowest recorded reasoning. The highest reasonings were a personal decision to participate and influence from previously participating in high school. Other closely related influencing factors were teammates, other athletes, and coaches.

Figure 2

Influencing Factors: Decision to Participate in FCA



FCA as a Coping Mechanism

For athletes, faith is often utilized as a resource and source of strength during difficult or challenging times and emotions faced inside and outside of competition. Participants were asked to indicate if FCA helps them deal with life challenges (injuries, loss, tragedy, etc.) and has supported them through those challenges—90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. Two of the participants who disagreed explained their reasoning as “not applicable” because they did not endure any situations that required coping. The responses are presented in Table 6.

While the participants indicated high levels of agreement, they also described several instances of the FCA's support, such as:

“Had a freak incident this past January and my chaplain reached out and prayed for me through

each surgery."
"I was supposed to miss four games in the season before Covid and ended up missing the whole season due to complications in my surgery. FCA helped me cope with that and gave me tools to move forward and to understand the reasons why it happened."
"Throughout my toughest year, great messages and truth help keep me strong."
"Just helps you knowing you have people who care about you and that are praying for my situation."
"I was supported through my cancer diagnosis."

Table 6
FCA in Life's Challenges

	Response % (*N*)			
Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q24: FCA helps me deal with life's challenges (injuries, loss, tragedy, etc.)	-	10% (2)	24% (5)	67% (14)
Q25: FCA supported me during life's challenges (injuries, loss, tragedy, etc.). Please give a brief description with your answer.	5% (1)	14% (3)	29% (6)	52% (11)

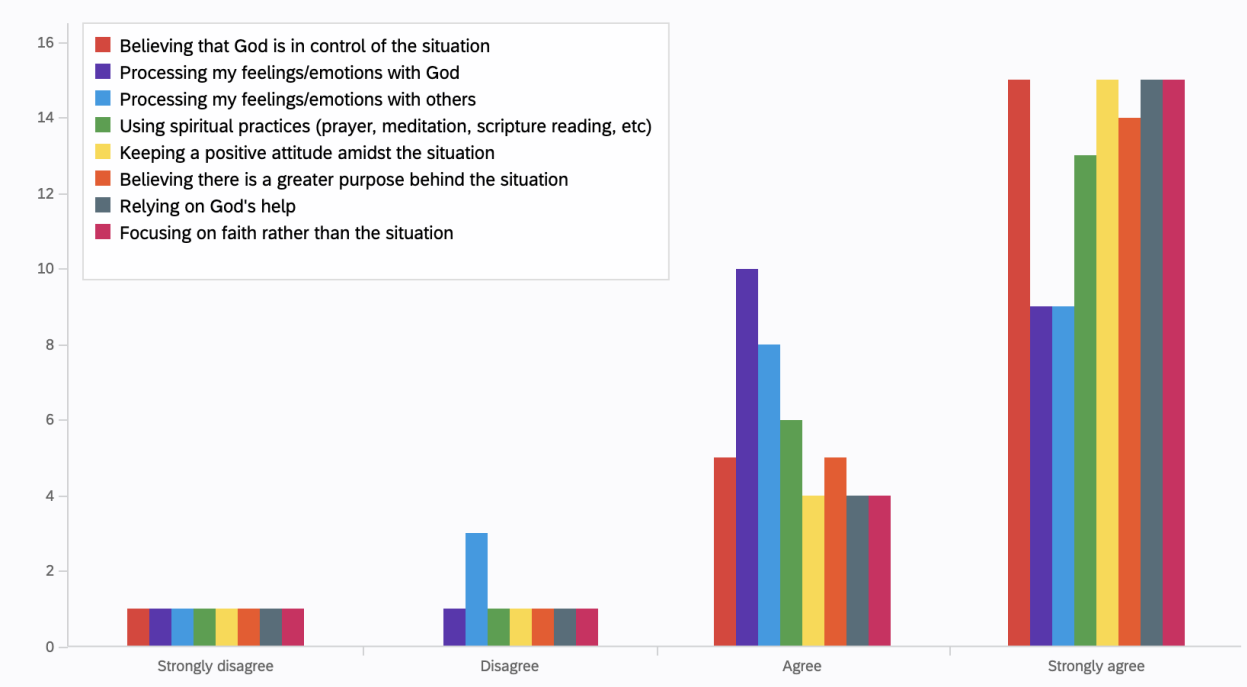
The FCA was reported to be an ever-present help in the respondents' time of need, coming alongside them for various life challenges. Additionally, the FCA provided an environment of care and concern that they could turn to during adverse circumstances.

Participants were also asked to rate the extent to which the FCA does or does not contribute to their response to dealing with life's challenges through specific practical methods. A summary is presented in Figure 3. These participants used religious faith as a coping mechanism, and the FCA facilitated this.

These positive religious coping methods mirror a confident relationship with God, a belief that there is greater meaning found in life, and a sense of spiritual connectedness with the FCA staff member and/or chaplain or fellow participants. The FCA acted as a parachurch by providing a similar spiritual structure to support athletes in coping and applying positive religious coping methods (Flowers, 2022).

Figure 3

Employed Coping Methods for Life's Challenges



Discussion

The findings allowed the researcher to understand the primary factors that influenced the faith development process based on the survey responses. Parks contended that the college setting provides an optimum environment for young adults to explore faith-based beliefs (2000). Realizing that their Christian faith was part of their identity, AAFSAs began to utilize their faith to help navigate their lives both on and off the field (Epting, 2013; Flowers, 2022).

In Stage 4 of Fowler's Faith Development Theory (Individuative-Reflective Faith), the individual takes personal responsibility for their beliefs and feelings (Fowler Faith Stages, 2012). A new environment "allows one to take control of their faith, freely question the faith of their parents or community, and choose how to move forward, instead of having the path dictated to them as likely occurred" (Sceggel, 2018, p. 35). The FCA provided a space of belonging community, furthering a positive environment for the participants to step out toward a spiritual growth journey (*RQ1*). These findings reflect characteristics of Fowler's Individuative-Reflective-Faith stage in which individuals begin to assume personal ownership of belief systems and integrate faith into emerging identity structures (Fowler, 1995).

Parks's Faith Development Theory adds an additional stage between Fowler's Stage 4 and Stage 5. Parks describes faith as not solely internalized but also guiding both personal and corporate behavior related to meaning, trust, and hope (Parks, 2000). By examining survey responses for *RQ1* and *RQ2* (Tables 3, 4, and 5), it was apparent that the participants demonstrated critical self-awareness, knew what they believed, and could make meaning of experiences involving their Christian faith. Participants indicated a sense of empowerment to live out the Christian faith and to share it with teammates.

Participants combined Christian and athletic identities to apply their faith in the sporting context, indicating they were equipped to share their faith with others.

Parks's Faith Development Theory posits that faith is expressed as individuals search to draw connections, patterns, order, and significance through life experiences, relationships, and events (Flowers, 2022; Parks, 2000). Through various life challenges, AAFSAs highly indicated that the FCA was a place of support (*RQ3*). Additionally, the FCA provided them with the foundation and structure to employ "spiritual tools" to navigate and make sense of their life challenges (Figure 3).

Raikes records that aside from peer-to-peer relationships, it is the influential others (faculty, campus staff, coaches, teammates, family, mentors, etc.) who assist with and help define and form the student-athlete's identity (Raikes, 2010). As previously mentioned, African American student-athletes face strenuous identity issues. African American student-athletes may struggle to establish strong social networks that moderate negative stress events during their collegiate tenure without mentoring relationships (Sato et al., 2018; Spitzer, 2000). The presence of these relationships is one vital factor that fuels academic, social, and athletic success as well as the retention of Black student-athletes (Sato et al., 2018). Collegiate ministries and organizations like the FCA can certainly benefit from fostering meaningful and helpful relationships while assisting students in staying engaged in the Christian community during their college years. Research continues to support the proposition that student-peer relationships have a profound and lasting impact on students' lives during college. Even more, they impact their psychosocial development (Jenney, 2010). For these AAFSAs, the FCA presented a vital relational community. The FCA provided an environment for AAFSAs to create meaningful relationships with their teammates and other student-athletes where peers could gather, invest, and help one another develop spiritually.

Many participants expressed a genuine desire to see more participants who looked like them and an FCA staff member and/or chaplain who reflected their racial identity. In contrast, some participants indicated they do not necessarily care if the FCA staff and/or chaplain looks like them. While it may seem contradictory, it is not; it uniquely indicates that for some AAFSAs, Christian and athletic identities are more salient than racial identities. A dualistic identification occurred when some AAFSAs maintained an attachment to their racial group (subgroup) while simultaneously and increasingly identifying with a superordinate group, the "Christian brotherhood." Nonetheless, many participants agreed that having someone reflect their racial identity could be beneficial. As AAFSAs and other African American athletes face various challenges while navigating a DI PWI, having a person who understands their perspective could bring deeper relationships and added assurance.

As college students explore various worldviews, spirituality remains a means of support, identity, and coping when confronted with academic and nonacademic challenges (Shipp, 2017; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Black student-athletes regularly employ their spiritual resources to help them cope with and thrive in their environments in PWIs (Galli & Reel, 2012; Seitz et al., 2014; Walker, 2019). Data from this research contribute additional findings to verify that African American males report greater use of religious coping. AAFSAs in this study cited several instances of support for various life circumstances and expressed that the FCA served as a critical support system. The FCA also contributed several spiritual coping methods that AAFSAs could employ for various life circumstances.

The FCA staff member and/or chaplain proved to be crucial in helping student-athletes feel welcomed and in providing opportunities for those who had faith in God to go deeper and for those who did not to discover Christian spirituality. As expected, their approach aligned with the FCA's E3 method to engage, equip, and empower.

Overall, findings from this study indicate that the FCA functioned as a structured environment in which AAFSAs could integrate faith with athletic and racial identity, cultivate relational belonging, and employ spiritual coping strategies. Participants' responses reflected characteristics of Fowler's Individuative-Reflective-Faith stage, as they demonstrated personal ownership of belief systems and intentional application of faith within high-pressure athletic contexts. Consistent with Parks's emphasis on young adult meaning making, the college environment served as a critical space for reexamining, deepening, and actively living out faith commitments.

Limitations

While this study's findings provide a foundational understanding of the spiritual development of AAFSAs facilitated by the FCA, several limitations warrant consideration. The researcher's positionality introduces a specific bias, particularly toward athletes identifying with the Christian faith. Notably, reflexivity was employed to address this potential bias. The constraints inherent in the response frame could be scrutinized; however, these limitations offer valuable insights into a challenging-to-reach demographic: DI football players of color. Findings should be interpreted within the context of the focused sample and are not intended to be generalized beyond similar institutional and cultural settings. Furthermore, it's important to acknowledge that the survey's focus was centered exclusively on the FCA without delving into other crucial aspects such as church involvement and mentorship.

An additional limitation pertains to the exclusive focus on DI football student-athletes, excluding examination of experiences among athletes at different levels of collegiate sports or within distinct sports teams. Moreover, the study's limited scope encompassed only secular institutions, neglecting the potential influence of faith-based institutions, which could introduce variability in the outcomes.

Lastly, the geographic context may have contributed to the observed results. The broader prevalence of Christian faith within Southern culture is evident, underscored by the presence of FCA staff members or character development coordinators in athletic directories of many Southern institutions. The inclination for the integration of Christian faith within football programs and coaching philosophy/pedagogy is notably amplified in this Southern cultural context (Pearce, 2020; Epting, 2013; Tweedie, 1978). These limitations underscore the need for cautious interpretation of findings and suggest avenues for future research to encompass a more comprehensive range of student-athletes, institutional types, and geographic settings.

Applications

Higher education has historically not done a suitable job of creating spiritual paths or opportunities for college students to participate in exploring, developing, or enhancing their personal spirituality and/or faith (Clarke, 2010). Higher education professionals can partner with the FCA to create opportunities for student-athletes to participate in service-learning initiatives. Student-athletes can participate in national or international mission trips coinciding with study abroad where athletes can

serve, learn about these respective places, grow spiritually, and receive academic credit.

Athletic departments should consider embracing a partnership with SMOs to holistically develop student-athletes. The FCA can be a vital resource that collegiate athletic departments can provide to assist student-athletes in their spiritual and personal development. Several Southern HEIs list a direct point of contact for the FCA or a character development coach as if they are valuable contributors to the function of athletics at their respective institutions. If not in partnerships with SMOs, athletic programs can bring on directors of character development who can address the spiritual development needs of student-athletes.

The FCA should consider establishing or encouraging FCA staff members and/or chaplains to use culturally relevant teachings. As African American student-athletes face a myriad of challenges, it is vital for them to be able to have conversations pertinent to their racial and spiritual identities. The FCA ought to consider recruiting more diverse candidates. This could be achieved by training and equipping current student-athletes that they are already working with from diverse groups. Additionally, one of the FCA's missions is to share faith through coaches. The FCA could make more intentional efforts to reach African American coaches and equip and empower them to start and lead bible studies with student-athletes. Moreover, it could be beneficial for Black student-athletes to be encouraged and equipped to become student leaders or advocates. Institutions should remain attentive to the intersection of racial identity, athletic identity, and spirituality when designing student-athlete support initiatives. These implications highlight the importance of culturally responsive and developmentally informed approaches to supporting African American student-athletes.

Future Research

This study contributes to understanding how AAFSAs at Kentucky's PWIs experience spiritual development. By examining the role of SMOs, the findings highlight how structured faith-based engagement intersects with identity formation and coping. A key contribution is the development of an evaluative instrument designed to assess the perceived impact of the FCA within its E3 framework. Participants viewed the FCA as a space that fostered relational belonging and provided spiritual coping resources. Continued refinement and broader implementation of the instrument across diverse institutions may strengthen its applicability.

The study's limitations point to the influence of geographic context, particularly the integration of Christian faith within Southern football culture. Future research should replicate this study in different regions, include additional sports and identity dimensions, and explore longitudinal patterns of faith development. Such efforts would deepen understanding of how spirituality functions within varied collegiate athletic environments.

Conclusion

This study advances scholarship on spirituality in higher education by centering African American Division I football student-athletes and examining how engagement with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes intersects with identity formation, belonging, and coping within predominantly White institutions. Participants perceived the FCA as a structured context that supported relational connection

and intentional faith integration amidst the pressures of collegiate athletics. The findings demonstrate how faith development processes described by Fowler and Parks operate within the intersecting domains of race, sport, and young adulthood. For these student-athletes, spirituality functioned as a meaningful framework through which athletic identity, racial identity, and Christian commitment were negotiated and integrated. As institutions continue to emphasize holistic student-athlete development, greater attention to the spiritual dimension—particularly within racially complex and high-performance environments—remains warranted. Continued inquiry across diverse institutional contexts will further clarify how spirituality shapes the lived experiences of collegiate athletes.

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