

## [Interest Convergence: A Revolutionary Theory for Athletic Reform](#)

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Interest Convergence: A Revolutionary Theory for Athletic Reform

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The structural arrangement of the intercollegiate athletic system at the NCAA Division FBS level, in relations to Black male athletes in revenue generating specifically, has been classified as a plantation system. Similarities in the plantation system and the intercollegiate athletic system are: economic exploitation, social and cultural suppression, institutional racism, and political control. The process of decolonization, or shifting of power, begins with the upheaval of political control, which ultimately results in the mitigation of these other negative experiences. What the nation has witnessed in the Mizzou-gate protest is the exertion of political opposition and a shift in political power in the form of a hunger strike by Jonathan Butler, and 30 Black Mizzou football players' willingness to "strike" in support of the *Concerned Student 1950* protests against racially sensitive issues on campus and the administrations neglect in appropriately addressing these issues.

The political activism taken by the Black Mizzou football players is noteworthy for several reasons. For example, athletes are indoctrinated from a very young age to be conformist; the athletic system at all levels (youth, interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional) fosters a politically conservative culture; a system of paternalism undergirds and nurtures this conservative culture, thus, apathy among athletes. Oftentimes, the conservatism bred in the sport culture and the deceptive practice of paternalism are enough to cause athletes to vacate the platform of activism and mismanage their publicity. Couple this with the commercial demands of the athletic departments and the fear of losing brand equity forces apathy among many college athletes. Despite these social constraints, these athletes exerted agency, which resulted in a shift in power and the resignation of two racially apathetic leaders.

This activism informs us of the political power athletes in revenue generating sport command, in general, and the power Black athletes possess, specifically. Especially since Black athletes make-up the majority of starters on football and basketball teams at these FBS institutions. Their efforts are monumental in the step to not only addressing racism in the broader university context, but also addressing issues of athletic reform.

This political activism is a case study in interest convergence, which according to Professor Derrick Bell, proposes that "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites." I contend that interest convergence can be a revolutionary theory in achieving racial reform, in general, and athletic reform, specifically; in the form of reducing the academic neglect and athletic exploitation experience by Black athletes,

specifically, and other athletes in revenue generating sports, in general. The Black football players at the University of Missouri is a great case to witness the turning of interest convergence on its head and into a revolutionary theory for racial reform, not only at the University of Missouri, but on university campuses throughout the U.S.

The interests of whites, within the corporate model of intercollegiate athletics, are to maintain the continuity of this multi-billion dollar industry. The Historically White Institutions and their corporate sponsors are the major benefactors in this arrangement and stand to lose considerably if Black athletes united and sought to achieve their interests of racial and athletic reform. In the case of Mizzou, solidarity with other students on campus and other non-black athletes can only strengthen the evolution in converging the interests of the institution and the students.

National attention has now been given to the racial disparities at the University of Missouri, because Black athletes united with Black student leaders and Jonathan Butler's hunger strike. This national media exposure also speaks to the power of the Black athletes in revenue generating sports at Historically White Institutions. Unfortunately, the impact of this power has yet to be fully actualized and used effectively to achieve desired results. This episode informs us that Black athletes can achieve their interests (e.g., racial and athletic reform) because the commercial interests of these institutions' athletic departments depend on their athletic performance and it is threatened with the absence of this Black athletic labor force.

Meaningful athletic reform will only take place when the political activism of athletes threatens the images, and most importantly, the commercial interests of universities and their athletic departments. Sometime it is a simple statement from the likes of Shabazz Napier, who after aiding University of Connecticut to win two NCAA National Championships, after winning the second championship in 2015, mentioned on national television his experiences of going to bed hungry and not having enough money to get food. After voicing his discontent, within weeks, the NCAA instituted a policy allowing universities to provide unlimited meals; a proposal that had been latent under bureaucracy since 2012. One comment, at the right time, by one athlete, produced action because it tarnished the image of collegiate athletics. Or, it can take the shape of Black athletes uniting in solidarity and speaking collectively against racial injustices, like what we have witnessed at the University of Missouri.

I stand in agreement with the efforts of these athletes and students and concur with them as they invoke the insight of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. where, "injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere," which they employed as a motto of their activism. I would also like to encourage these athletes and other student organizations across this nation that are uniting to address racial injustices on their respective campuses with a quote from Margaret Mead that, "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

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