

“It’s an artist’s responsibility to paint a vision of the future that’s better than what we have now.”—Talib Kweli (2001)

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The empires of entertainment and sport largely shape American societal cultural values and norms. The messages promoted and thereby consumed by American youth in and around entertainment (network television, cable, mainstream radio, iTunes, etc.) and sport (network and cable game broadcasts, pregame shows, sport documentaries, etc.) are powerful influences.

We are acutely aware of the power of knowledge and both formal and informal education. However there are major cultural disconnects between the educational, athletic and entertainment communities in America. This gap and lack of synergy between these three “empires” impacts the lifelong learning and consumption patterns of students, student-athletes and the general public in America. Two obvious questions are: when did this disconnect begin and how do we connect education, sport and entertainment in a constructive way so that youth and young adults master the skill of lifelong learning and intellectual engagement?

One sociologist, Professor James S. Coleman (1960), communicated his thoughts on this cultural disconnect based on his cultural era and empirical evidence in his article “The Adolescent Subculture and Academic Achievement” published in the American Journal of Sociology.

According to Coleman (1960):

In effect, then, what our society has done is to set apart, in an institution of their own, adolescents for whom home is little more than a dormitory and whose world is made up of activities peculiar to their fellows. They have been given as well many of the instruments which can make them a functioning community: cars, freedom in dating, continual contact with the opposite sex, money, and entertainment, like popular music and movies, designed especially for them. The international spread of “rock-and-roll” and of so-called American patterns of adolescent behavior is a consequence, I would suggest, of these economic changes which have set adolescents off in a world of their own (pp. 337-38).

Fifty years later, how are Coleman’s (1960) research and ideas applicable to the gap between education, sport and entertainment? First, Coleman called for a fundamental change to occur and the urgency to shift the focus. Second, this shift in focus would mold social communities (education, sport and entertainment) as allied communities that culturally shape students and student-athletes in a positive way. This shaping occurs through a common message, labeling, and a healthy stigma that all in society can identify with: this common image is the *Scholar-Baller®*. A parallel to Coleman’s (1960) notion of rock and roll’s strong impact is today’s influence of music, style, and mindset by hip-hop.

Scholar-Baller®, at a basic level, means an educated individual that also participates in athletics, art, music, or any other extra-curricular activity. The colloquial energy and slang part of the term combines intellectualism with a global identity that began in urban neighborhoods across America- the “baller”. Historically in urban communities (since the Civil Rights Era), there have been three primary representations of success depicted to urban youth: the entertainer, athlete, and various illegal identities of crime and corruption. These three avenues of success are admired because they signify money, material possessions, and access to the opposite sex because of their baller status. One thing that makes the term baller so culturally relevant is that it can be a noun, verb, or adjective. In popular culture, baller has been mainstreamed on ESPN, MTV, and major newspapers such as USA Today. Baller is overloaded on the Internet and on the tip of the tongue of millions seeking to have status and be perceived as cool irrespective to race, ethnicity, or culture.

By combining “scholar” with “baller” a new identity in America and global culture is born. Hence, this is what the Scholar Baller® Curriculum seeks to accomplish—bridge the gap between education, sport and entertainment. This can only be accomplished by giving student-athletes, students, teachers, coaches, advisors, and athletic administrators a tool and device that is unique, thoroughly researched, user-friendly, and culturally relevant to the world of our youth and young adults. We must now ask why popular culture has not been embraced and more mainstreamed in all public schools and institutions of higher learning. The answer to this question and validation of the Scholar Baller® Curriculum appears in Professor Robert Rueda’s (2004) article “An Urban Education View of Culture and Learning,” where he outlines some problematic aspects in terms of how culture has been treated with respect to teaching and learning:

- Making monolithic judgments about entire groups (often around racial and/or ethnic lines) without considering within-group and individual differences;
- Focusing on surface features of culture;
- Focusing on presumed culturally-related variables that have failed to show a relationship to learning such as learning styles;
- Treating culture as a deficit rather than a resource in learning;
- Equating group labels, especially racial and ethnic group labels, with cultural characteristics;
- Assume cultural influences operate rigidly in all settings;
- Relying on presumed characteristics without considering empirical validation (p. 21).

All of the seven areas of concern outlined in Rueda’s (2004) article, above, are addressed in the Scholar Baller® Curriculum in a positive way and solution-oriented manner. These are some of the key reasons that the concept, language, and content of the curriculum have helped (and will continue to help) student-athletes create a positive self-image and gain a more holistic understanding for how education, sport, and entertainment can become one healthy lifestyle.

Introduction to the Scholar Baller® Curriculum

A Case Study of Success: Arizona State University

The Scholar Baller® program was first implemented at Arizona State University beginning in 2001. Initially, football student-athletes who earned a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) in the previous fall or spring school semesters earned a Scholar Baller® T-Shirt. In the fall of 2003, ASU became the first collegiate athletic team to wear a patch on their jersey recognizing academic prowess. Since the implementation of the Scholar Baller® program at ASU, 9 different sport teams have implemented elements of this concept. There were significant and measurable results on the football team and program:

- The average GPA for the team increased for the first 5 academic years after program implementation;
- Freshmen cohort GPA's increased from an average of 1.75 over 3 years to over 2.50 for the next 4 years;
- The incidences of academic ineligibility nearly disappeared;
- The number of student-athletes with semester or cumulative GPAs over 3.00 went from the 10 to 19 (teen range) to nearly 50 (46) over 4 years.

Because Arizona State University was the first institution to officially implement the Scholar Baller® program, it is only fitting to give statistical proof of how the implementation of this program has in fact had a significant impact on the institution's athletic program. The staff at ASU has definitely embraced the Scholar-Baller® concept and as a result, their student-athletes' value for the educational experience and pursuit of excellence has greatly increased.

After the frontier implementation at ASU and subsequent presentations about the program, several schools immediately created their version of the program (for example, Fresno State, University of Tennessee and the University of Purdue). In fact, in the 2003 Sun Bowl, ASU wore the Scholar Baller ThinkMan® patch and Purdue wore the SA (or "success in academics") patch, becoming the first time that two institutions wore academic patches in a bowl game.

The Scholar-Baller® lifestyle and movement consists of 3 major components:

- 1) Scholar Baller® Research
- 2) Scholar Baller® Incentives – rewarding student-athletes for their contemporary successes in balancing academics and athletics, and
- 3) The Scholar Baller® Curriculum.

Empirical Data

The purpose of the Scholar Baller® Research Division is to investigate how the prominence of negative stereotypes in a classroom context undermines the academic achievement of college student-athletes. Decades of research have shown that many academic faculty and students hold negative stereotypes about student-athletes, compared to other students. To some, student-athletes are seen as less intelligent, not as motivated, and or not prepared for college courses. These negative beliefs, when made salient in a classroom or other educational performance context, have the potential to undermine the best performance efforts of student-athletes. Drawing from theory and research on stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002), the specific goals of the research are to:

- (1) Investigate how the salience of the negative stereotypes impact the academic performance of student-athletes in the classroom and to
- (2) Develop and test the effectiveness of the Scholar Baller® intervention strategy that is designed to enhance the academic performance of student-athletes when they experience stereotype threat.

A Scholar Baller® Culture

The Scholar Baller® identity is a norm for behavior based on popular culture principles, and is shared by staff, students, and parents. When the whole school community uses the common language and cultural strategies provided by the Scholar Baller® program, student-athletes are able to move beyond reacting to negative events and head towards a common vision of an ideal athletic program. Scholar-Ballers® make conscious choices to delay gratification and invest in lifelong learning and work to inspire the whole community to join together in rearing and educating its student-athletes. Because the student-athletes themselves are active participants in all phases of this radical change, they have many opportunities to learn and receive recognition for mature actions.

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