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# A Student, An Athlete and a Person of Color: The Challenge of Thriving in Predominantly White Institutions - With Two Strikes Against You

Renita Tyrance

*Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

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# **A Student, An Athlete and a Person of Color: The Challenge of Thriving in Predominantly White Institutions - With Two Strikes Against You**

## **Abstract**

*This guided panel will include discussions of approximately eight celebrated current and former UNL athletes of color from five sports over a period of twenty-five years. Panelists will be asked questions about their social and cultural experiences prior to, during and after their tenure of athletic participation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

## **Renita Tyrance**

Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

W.E. DuBois understood the difficulty associated with being a person of color committed to academic excellence in a predominantly white society. However, he never had the auspicious opportunity to experience the hardship and exasperation associated with being a person of color, a person of color who is a student and last, but not least, a person of color who is a student and an athlete within a predominantly white institution.

The basic tenants of DuBois' writings remain applicable today despite progress in the area of race relations; had he been a student athlete in addition to a person of color he likely would have addressed the athlete dimension as well. The philosophical rationale that necessitated the coinage of a "double consciousness" would take on greater significance and beg of a third level of consciousness to be entered into our lexicon. Viewed in light of the many unwarranted challenges associated with student-athletes of color in predominantly white institutions, thriving is a challenge when there are two strikes against you.

Being a student of color on a predominantly white campus has a distinct and cumbersome set of social, psychological and emotional considerations. Among these are: high visibility, stereotypical expectations inside and outside of the classroom and the unsolicited responsibility of being a "role model." The dilemma DuBois spoke so clearly of crystallizes this experience:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double - consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that look on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keep it from being tom asunder. The history of the Negro is the history of strife - this longing to attain self-consciousness manhood, to merge his double into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost."

Couple this new understanding with the third level of consciousness, the one associated with being a student athlete of color and you will appreciate the extra challenges these students face.

Using DuBois' "Double Consciousness" concept, the panel will discuss the need to add a third level of consciousness by exploring the experiences of students of color within predominantly white institutions. Working with a panel of former men and women student athletes of color from several of UNL's athletic teams, I will guide the panel discussion of their experiences to present a poignant presentation of challenges imposed on students, who are also persons of color and athletes on a predominantly white campus; we will also discuss changes that can improve the situation for student athletes who are people of color. DuBois' hope still resonates with us today: "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face."

### **Reference**

DuBois, W.E.B. 1903. "Double-Consciousness and the Veil" from *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam.

### **Presenter**

**Renita Tyrance** is a first year student in the Ph.D. program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is returning to the rigor of academia after ten years in public education. Renita graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a Bachelors of Science degree in Education and minor degrees in English and Sociology in 1988. In 1991 she secured a Master of Education degree within the Curriculum and Instruction Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Renita's doctoral research will focus on the Sociology of Education and Family Violence. She hopes to present valuable research data identifying the corollary between elementary age students who have witnessed, been victims of, or perpetrated family violence and their academic success/failure in school. She is the 2001 recipient of the University of Nebraska's Department of Graduate Studies' "Graduate Assistant Mentor of the Year" award.