

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF MENTORS ON BLACK FOOTBALL PLAYERS
ON PREDOMINATELY WHITE COLLEGE CAMPUSES

By

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

SOCIOLOGY

2012

ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF MENTORS ON BLACK FOOTBALL PLAYERS ON PREDOMINATELY WHITE COLLEGE CAMPUSES

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Based on interviews 21 with black student-athletes, this qualitative study identifies critical factors that help African American football players to adjust academically, socially, and emotionally to university life. The participants were members of two National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 Football Bowl Subdivision teams. The study focuses on why black student-athletes are experiencing difficulty transitioning on predominately white campuses and simultaneously rejecting current mentor programs aimed to help them adjust successfully. The study uncovers the reason behind black players dismissal of mentor programs and call for a redevelopment of mentor programs with younger actors, focused on community engagement in order to decrease the graduation rate gap. Compared to black student-athletes who lacked effective mentors, black student-athletes with mentors they embraced fared better.

Keywords: mentors, development, isolation, football

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Introduction

In the field of sports studies a relevant amount of research has been devoted toward the graduation gap between black and white football players, however, few studies have looked at the specifics required for a successful transition from a high school student athlete into a graduation-track college student athlete (Eitzen and Purdy 1986). This study has three purposes. To begin with, identifying key stressors that effect special populations, who are considered a double-minority, social minorities on college campuses (e.g. black, student-athlete) encounter barriers to successful transition especially when these individuals support minority positions or viewpoints. The two social minority characteristics coming together create a double-minority status (Walls 1998). Next, this study will provide an assessment of the level of influence social-spatial determinants have on black student-athletes at the Division 1 level. In that student athletes are mutually influenced by the social and political structures of their local environment and help shape the social and political structures of their campus environments (Soja 1980). With this in mind, identifying what factors influence successful adjustment of black student-athletes to college life and if the active presence of a mentor can help ease the transition from high school to college level sports, academia, and social adjustment. This study will also address two main questions. First, why are black athletes experiencing difficulty integrating into white university campuses? Next, why are some black student athletes rejecting college-adaptation programs aimed to assist with their transition academically, emotionally, and socially to campus life?

Transition to College Life

The transition from adolescence to adulthood remains a critical and vulnerable period in the life course as it involves monumental social role changes (Schulenberg, Sameroff, and Cicchetti 2004). For black student-athletes this transition period is most likely to occur during their scholarship contract at their respective university.

Schulenberg, Sameroff, and Cicchetti (2004) suggest that this transitional time period may also influence one's trajectory of psychopathology and mental health status. During this critical stage, one's life experiences are greatly diversified and developmental milestones occur simultaneously (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003; Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnson, forthcoming; Sherrod, Haggerty, & Featherman 1993). Throughout the developmental transitional period from high school to college, various social actions should be assessed differently during various stages of the life course, "Behaviors that in one context are considered deviant, in another may be age-appropriate," (Schulenberg, et al. 2004).

In the case of black student-athletes, such behaviors as substance use or group fighting in defense of a friend may be a method of social bonding. The displays of unity or brotherhood can also be explained as elements of cool masculinity or cool pose (Majors and Billson 1993). The term cool is used to express a long standing coping mechanism adopted by black males to adjust the dominant definition of masculinity as some elements have been elusive due to the history of racism and discrimination in the US and not just viewed as a colloquial phrase. To explain further, "By cool pose we mean the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing,

impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control,” (Majors and Billson 1993). Displays of cool masculinity while acceptable in many urban environments, black students may feel pressure to conform on their predominantly white campuses (Matthews 2009).

Melendez (2008) conducted a study on the social and developmental issues experienced by black athletes from urban cities transitioning into a predominately white academic institution with a majority of white coaches and student peers. Experiences on the team (judging, differing values, conformity, expectations), city stressors (behavioral and value expectations), experiences in the city (inhospitable, intolerant, unwritten rules, racist), academic stressors (grades, retention, stigma), experiences on campus (stereotyping of black athletes, rejecting, resentful), and athletic stressors (winning, performance) all led to black players’ emotional realities of mistrust, self-protection, and isolation (Melendez 2008). Many players interviewed in the study confessed that they felt obligated by their coaching staff to “sell out” in order to bypass harsh judgment from some non-athlete black peers, white teammates, and white coaches alike. The concept of “selling out” was defined by black student-athletes as, “giving up one’s cultural values and beliefs and, in turn accepting those of the majority culture,” (Melendez 2008). Differing cultural codes and forced assimilation can lead to resentment and mistrust of white coaches by black student-athletes (Melendez 2008).

A singular definition of mentorship still remains an elusive goal, but is applicable when a relationship between a young adult and more experienced mentor develops and when the mentor offers support, advice, and guidance (Kram 1988 and Merriam 1983). As noted by Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, and Salmela (1998) college students with

mentors, “experienced more positive changes in their self-confidence and overall developmental status compared to their matched controls,”(p.269). Furthermore, Vallant and Milofsky (1980) reported that mentoring positively influenced identity and intimacy. In regards to student-athletes, “athletes who had mentors acting as confidants, counselors, or positive role models reported a higher degree of comfort to express emotions and commit to relationships,” (Bloom et. al 1998: 270). In our case, revised mentoring programs geared for student-athletes that include the supportive dynamics for black players should be made a priority. Player development is an all consuming task that many high profile programs do not account for as their coaches are spread too thin and cannot devote enough time to mentor the amount of players on a traditional football team (Willis 2011).

Smith (2007) discusses issues of distrust and defensive individualism among low-income black populations. The concept of distrust in low economic neighborhoods is highly complex in nature and should not be viewed as a universal truth. In one study conducted by Gerald Suttles (1968) found there to be racial differences in various types of social support in the low- income neighborhood he profiled. However, Suttles only found racial differences in social support among adults in the neighborhood and not in adolescents (Suttles 1968). In regards to black student-athletes, most enter college at ages 17 and 18 and may bring a trusted peer group philosophy with them to college.

According to Smith (2007) individuals are classified as a “high” truster or a “low” truster, with no direct benefit from either category. While high trusters may be more susceptible to disappointment from trusting the wrong person or organization, low trusters may miss opportunities due to consistently holding back. However even if a

black student-athlete came into a football program as a high-truster it may be more likely that they turn into a low truster after their experiences with the coaching staff after their freshman year (Smith 2007).

Trust networks are earned and developed over long-standing reciprocal relationships. These networks can be analyzed through the strength or fragility of close ties (Smith 2007). A study of networks on black street-corner men in, *Tally's Corner* (1967) researcher Elliot Liebow hypothesized:

Many of his subjects' relationships were doomed to fail because they tended to develop intimate relationships very quickly, publically declaring their commitment to one another by "going for brothers" or "going for cousins," for example, and offering the requisite material and social support assumed to exist between individuals occupying these formal roles without learning the personal history of their "brother" or "cousin" and without establishing through a series of ever increasing exchanges the mutual trust and displays of trustworthiness needed. As a result, friendships did 'not often stand up well to the stress of crisis or conflict of interest, when demands tend to be heaviest and most insistent. Everyone knows this. Extravagant pledges of aid and comfort between friends are, at one level, made and received in good faith. But on another level, fully aware of his friends' limited resources and the demands of their self-interest, each person is ultimately prepared to look to himself alone' (180).

This type of network is heavily encouraged by many coaching staffs and refer to their programs as a "Football Family" or that teammates are to be considered as a "Fraternity of Brothers" as early as the first recruiting visit in some cases. Therefore, there is a high degree of fragility in those close ties formed with teammates and coaches who express this mantra.

Data and Methods

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) twenty-one black research participants were selected based on their current or former membership to a Division 1 football program. All participants were approached on a volunteer basis and on the grounds that their names and any information disclosed that may identify them be kept confidential. The office of compliance and the department of athletics of each university were contacted in order to obtain permission to interview student athletes on campus. The athletic department was also contacted in order to help facilitate times that student athletes could meet during study table hours to participate in the one-on-one interviews. Each interviewee was first presented a confidential consent form that explained the purpose of the research, informed them of the voluntary nature of their participation, and detailed contact information if any questions or concerns emerged at any point in time. The majority of the interviews took place on weekend study hall hours and a few took place after morning meetings during the weekdays.

Interviews were conducted on two different University campuses that will be identified as “University X” and “University Y.” Student Athletes interviewed at University X has a student enrollment over 35, 000 undergraduate and 10,000 post-graduate students. University Y has a student enrollment upwards of 20,000 undergraduates and 2,000 post-graduate students. Both universities are widely known for their traditional winning football programs as well as perpetual division championship contenders. A total of twenty-one current and former student athletes were interviewed. Only one of the twenty-one players were from a campus based town.

The survey instrument contained five sections: Experience in High School (1), Experience in College (2), Transition with Mentor (3), Transition without Mentor (4), and Perceived Issues (5). In section one, research participants were first asked background questions regarding, race, class rank (underclassman or upperclassman), and to identify their parent's social class status. From there, research participants were asked to describe their high school football experience as a student athlete, their intimate relationships with parents, coaches, and mentors (if applicable), and what assistance if any they received in regards to academic studies and emotional issues.

Section two required players to describe their experiences in college as a student athlete, elaborating on the relationship they developed with their coaches, the academic transition from high school to college, and who or where they seek emotional support to discuss life issues such as relationship troubles, legal matters, or a friend's death. Section three focused on questions on how the transition from high school to college transpired if the participant identified a mentor, while section four were delegated to participants who did not identify having a mentor present. Section five allowed the players to discuss some of the perceived issues they were facing regarding the community's response to their presence and/or reputation in the town by fans, local residents, and non-athlete student peers. They also were asked if they felt comfortable on campus and in the surrounding town, if they had experienced any type of discrimination, and if a mentor assisted them in this transition period.

A social anthropological approach was applied during the data collection process in order for the researcher to gain a special perspective and understanding of how black student-athletes interpret their social reality (Berg 2004). The researcher worked as an

academic mentor to black football players for 1.5 years at a Division 1 level program in order to conduct a thorough participant observation in addition to conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews after the duration of employment as a mentor. First hand, knowledge of what how the athletic academic staff and coaches manage the academic careers of the football players was a critical element in identifying the level of agency football players had in their academic careers. As well as what programs were in place to assist them in their overall player development socially through religious athlete programs and black focused black programs sponsored by the athletic program.

All data was coded into seven categories: mentor status, high trusters, low trusters, connectedness and comfort level, academic standing, perceived fan support, and family involvement. Mentor status was noted in order to compare the remaining six categories against the group of students who had a mentor present and those who did not, in order to determine if mentorship had a direct influence. The high and low trust category was used to note how open and trusting the student athlete towards the football program and assistant coaches. High trusters are more likely to trust coaching staff and teammates without much hesitation. Low trusters are less likely to trust coaching staff and teammates and remain cautious. Connectedness and comfort level was used to measure the success of their adjustment to college from high school. Perceived fan support provided information on crowd support or disapproval and how that affected them personally. Family involvement gave insight on their kin support network.

All research participants identified themselves as black or African American. Nineteen participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. Two former athletes over the age of 40 were interviewed in order to note if there were any significant changes in the

personal narratives of black student athletes that may be used for a future continuation of this study. The majority of blacks players did not report having a mentor. The few participants who did identify a present mentor, stated that their mentors were typically within 10 years of age. Some mentors were senior members on the football team, older brothers, younger coaches, or assigned mentors from their respected athletic department.

Only a handful of black players described experiencing a good/smooth transition from high school to college compared to the majority of participants who described a more difficult transition. The majority of black players found the transition to be difficult based on rigorous academic demands, unfamiliarity with how college football programs are managed, and instability with fickle fan base. Players that found their transition to be largely positive identified having a hometown similar to that of their university and having attended a high school that prepared them for college academic work. An overwhelming number of the black players interviewed commented on being open and trusting. Those athletes were classified in the high truster category. Fortunately, only a small portion of black players interviewed expressed feelings of being wronged by previous coaches and family members prior to attending college and thus were categorized as being a low truster.

Over half of black players interviewed reported that they felt disconnected to the surrounding town and football program. Many players identified high school football as a tightly bonded family and described college football as more of a business. Therefore, they felt largely disconnected from their coaching staff. The number of players on a college team is also substantially larger than on a high school roster, thus while players felt close to some players they barely knew others. In addition, the majority of black

players described their campus to be vastly different from their hometowns and found it difficult to connect on many levels. Of the players that felt connected to their team and campus community identified (1) having a strong family or long standing friendship tie within short distances or (2) that their new town reminded them of their town of origin or (3) they developed a close bond with their position coach. In terms of academic status, all athletes were asked to comment on their academic standing with the university currently. Players that self-reported being in good academic standing (57%) slightly edged out those who self-reported being on academic probation (42%) by either university standards or standards set by their head coach.

A very small portion of interviewees felt that fans were consistently positive toward the team, players, and coaches while the majority of respondents felt the fans were either negative or fickle with their support. The majority of athletes surveyed stated that the fan support was extremely fickle in nature. For example, when the team is winning the fans show up to the games and scheduled community events in large numbers and most interactions with students on campus are pleasant and congratulatory. However, if the team is losing a host of other problems occur, such as negative media campaigns, hostile fans, snide remarks from professors, and non athlete student peers verbally attacking the football program as a whole or individual players and coaches.

The level of family involvement was measured based on who they went to for emotional support (social and football related). The majority of players reported that their family had a high level of involvement while they were in high school. However, high levels of family involvement drop once players moved and started college. The

majority of players reported low family involvement in college and only a small fraction reported that their families remained highly involved in college.

Findings

Black student athletes face barriers transitioning to a predominately white university campus lifestyle. According to the data, many black athletes are entering college as high trusters but are quickly discouraged by an environment that is susceptible to fickle fan support and a false sense of family. This vulnerability is heightened by the instability in a high head coach job turnover rate that is not present in high school football. Many black players are hundreds of miles away from their hometown without the close physical proximity support of family or mentor that may lead to high levels of isolation.

While black student athletes strongly desire a mentor to help with their transition, they reject the current transition based programs. Players from University X described two college-adaption programs that both centered on mentor relationships. Most players deemed those programs failures as the mentors assigned were “out of touch” with their lifestyle. However, the desire for a more appropriate mentor remained strong. Players from University Y did not have a formalized college-adaption program in place. Nevertheless, players from University Y that stated they had a good transition from high school to college gave credit to the consistent support of a mentor. And of those players from University Y that did not have a mentor present, expressed a need and desire for one.

Players from University X and Y who identified having a mentor described having a close confidant to discuss life issues relevant to confidential football matters, relationship problems, coaching changes, and other matters to were more connected and less isolated than those who did not have a mentor.

Melendez (2008) noted that student-athletes can be “victims of animosity and resentment resulting from their elevated social status”(p.432). Furthermore, stereotypes such as “dumb jocks” or “thugs” permeates throughout college campuses from their non-athlete peers and the faculty (Engstrom and Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1997). Players interviewed for our study were in agreement with these sentiments however many narratives echoed that Division 1 football was more of a business and that their transition from high school improved once they detached themselves personally from certain aspects of the overall experience. For example one player stated,

I don't really trust any of the coaches, cuz I don't feel like they look out for any of my best interests. It's like you're a factory worker. You go in there, do your job and then you're out and someone else comes. The system keeps replacing itself. Our head coach does the best but the other assistant coaches they don't care, they only want to promote themselves, I wouldn't trust no one.

The factory analogy or business like model is a stark contrast from the experience most players identified with having in high school. Collectively players looked back fondly on their high school football experience as a true family bond. It was common for players to spend time in their coach's homes; share meals with their coach's family, and many reported that their parents also had a close relationship with the coaching staff. Typically, high school coaches are long standing members of the community and teach classes at the school they coach. In contrast, Division 1 college coaches are hired only to coach and do not teach college courses. Coupled with high media and alumni demands limited time remains to spend with players or build rapport with their parents.

Black player college graduation rates have increasingly improved over the last ten years, however seven of the top ten teams fall below the graduation average (Weiberg,

2010). In 2010, sixteen of the top twenty-five Bowl Championship Series teams also fell below the four year standing graduation average (Weiberg 2010). Many of these universities are located in predominantly white university campuses such as Boise, Idaho, or Eugene, Oregon. Academic performance may be influenced by the social-spatial conditions of the football programs located on predominantly white university campuses. According to Klein (1993) spatial conditions affect participation in sports especially among minorities.

When one player was asked what he found to be the most challenging in his transition to campus life, he responded:

Money and transportation. Sometimes I just have to ask for rides, like everyone else. We are only allowed to work during the summer, I could ask Coach if I could get a job, but he would probably say no, that's only for walk-ons.

Many football programs do not encourage their athletes to get jobs and the financial assistance provided to them is limited with a good portion of their checks going towards on-campus housing. Moreover, many universities do not allow freshman students to have a car while attending school. This decreases the accessibility many black athletes have to their familial support system and increases the distance to familiar cultural cornerstones such as barbershops, churches, and black populations.

Cosgrove (1986) found that college students with mentors, “experienced more positive changes in their self-confidence and overall developmental status compared to their matched controls,” (p.269). With the completion of this study, similar results confirmed Cosgrove’s findings. Of the black players that identified having a mentor present they also reported having a good transition to college and felt more connected to the campus and team. University X has attempted to establish a mentor program

specifically with their black student athletes in mind. It included many black pastors and other local black community leaders that served as mentors. The mentors met the student athletes during their assigned training table (dinner) hour and exchanged email and phone numbers with players in hopes of setting up a meeting in the player's free time. One player who rejected their suggested mentor that was assigned to him during his freshman year through a mentor program that has since been terminated, noted this:

They would come meet us at training table and we would talk to them. Exchange emails and I don't know they just did a terrible job. I mean you have to fit at the right spot, personality wise. This guy was just talking about 'wanna meet me up for pancakes?' and I don't have time for that. So I mean if they do a mentor (program), maybe it should be somebody in college or just got out of college and not set in their old ways.

The player mentioned that he thinks a mentor would help him, but also believes that a mentor who is "out of touch" is useless.

Smith (2007) classifies individuals based on their trust level propensity as "high" or "low" trusters. Smith did not find a direct benefit to either category however both face various consequences. For instance, high trusters are vulnerable to disappointment from placing faith in an untrustworthy source, and low trusters may miss out on positive opportunities. Trust networks are earned and developed over long-standing reciprocal relationships. These networks can be analyzed through the strength or fragility of close ties (Smith 2007). Therefore, traditional football mantras that spread the message of having a "Football Family" by coaches to the media and young players, especially during the recruitment process can be potentially damaging to a young players' psyche. One player noted:

You know coach says were like family, which is cool. But it really is more of a business. I feel that is more like a business, more than anything.

When asked how his relationship was with the coach who recruited him was he responded:

He's defense, I'm offense. We don't talk anymore. We might pass each other in the hall and he'll say something about my grades.

There appears to be a disconnect between what the coaches are professing and what the players are actually feeling. The majority of players interviewed were classified as being high trusters that possibly made them more susceptible to disappointment during their first year in college. When one player was asked to describe the relationship with his position coach he responded:

We don't talk no more, yea I don't really like him, I don't really care that he doesn't like me.

When asked if he trusted his coach he exclaimed:
Hell no!

The false sense of closeness may be more detrimental to black student-athletes psychosocial development. Collectively, black players trust level of the football program dramatically decreased after their first year at school.

From the narratives of the players, a conceptual map (Figure 1) was created to show how the fragility of the player's relationships with teammates and coaches at the college level in conjunction with an unwelcoming new town magnify a weak social support network that creates a space for player isolation and academic concern. Figure 1 serves as an illustrative model of the fragility of close ties among teammates, the mistrust of the assistant coaching staff, the emotionality from feeling unwelcomed in their new university town, and the lack of a social support system that all resulted in some form of isolation and academic concerns

Conclusion

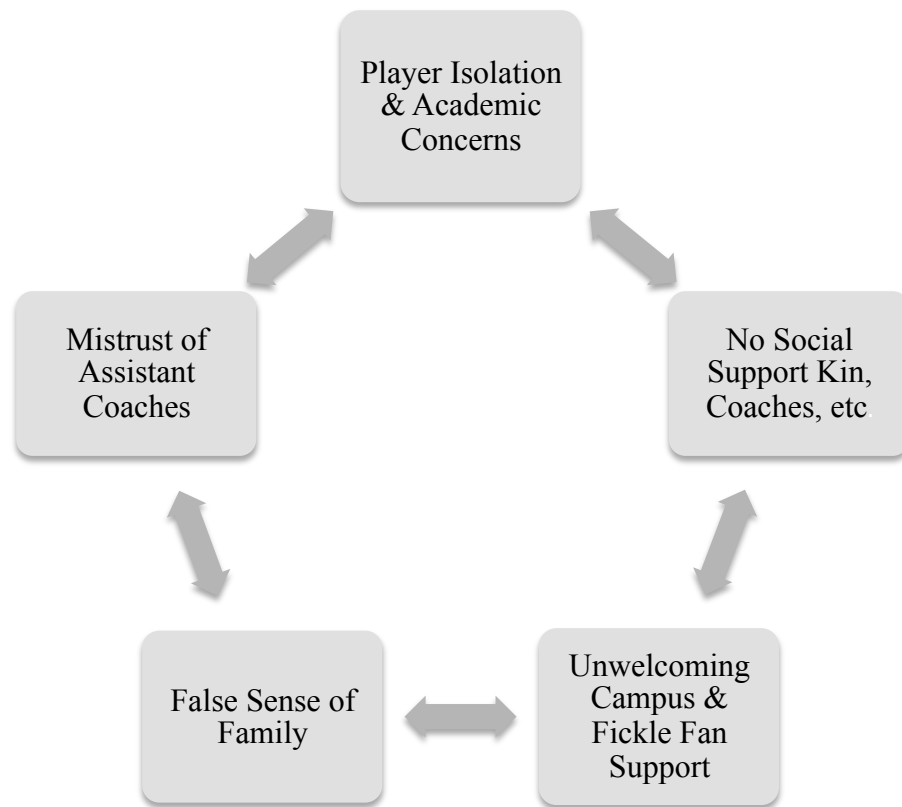
This study examined black student-athletes transition to college life on predominantly white campuses based on their attitudes and experiences with current transition based programs. The research finds that while there is a strong need for these programs, the right actors are necessary for their success. By focusing on the perceptions and experiences of black college football players from a comprehensive standpoint including academic status, emotional well-being and social markers allowed for the development of a conceptual map of trust networks and coping strategies that successfully transitioned black football players implemented. This assessment allowed for the acknowledgment of what tools and actors assisted in comprehensive player development for black football players to move toward graduation during their college careers. Moreover, recognizing the level of influence mentors have on the level of comfort and trust to a new environment, teammates, coaches, and academic staff. Thus, if a student athlete has a sense of connectedness to their university, a greater sense of agency may occur in their academic performance as well.

Players reported that their fan base was fickle in nature and the community only supported the football program when the team maintained winning records. The mistrust of coaches combined with a lack of social support and underutilization of social support services all lead to player isolation. Due to the large portion of black players coming into college as high trusters, there are more consequences to successful adjustment academically and emotionally when that trust is proven unworthy. However, black student-athletes who reported having a mentor during their college careers also reported that they had a positive transition to from high school to college and felt more connected

to town and team. Players who reported not having a mentor thought it might have been helpful if they had a mentor that they could share and relate.

Some players who were a part of a mentor program at one point in their college careers consider those mentor programs to have failed them. Collectively they felt that the mentors assigned to them were either too old or out of touch with their lifestyles. Mentor programs with younger mentors that have familiarity with the elevated social status of student-athletes and insider knowledge of the inner workings of Division 1 football programs would most likely prove successful. Thus, I conclude that a college-adaption based mentor program with younger mentors and a greater focus on community engagement would greatly assist black student-athletes transition to campus life. An all encompassing emphasis on student athletes transition to college may lead to better graduation rates for players.

FIGURE 1. PLAYER ISOLATION MODEL



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