

It's who you know: Study shows hurdles facing black football coaches

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Why are there so few black coaches in big-time college football? New research from North Carolina State University shows that it really does come down to who you know, and how well you know them. But the findings go against conventional wisdom, showing that black assistant coaches may be better served by making connections with a diverse group of acquaintances rather than forming a close-knit circle of friends.

"African-American coaches have a more difficult time advancing in their field. So we set out to try to understand why," says Jacob Day, a Ph. D. student in sociology at NC State and lead author of the new paper. "We found that the paths to opportunity for white and black coaches are very different," explains Steve McDonald, assistant professor of sociology at NC State and co-author of the study.

The numbers illustrate the inequality among coaches at the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level of college football - formerly known as Division I-A. Approximately 10 percent of the 120 FBS head coaches are black, compared with almost 30 percent of the assistant coaches and more than 50 percent of the players. But why is this the case, and what can be done to create new opportunities for black assistant coaches?

The researchers looked at surveys from 320 FBS assistant coaches, 218 white and 102 black, which provided data on each coach's social networks - the people that each [coach](#) knew had helped him in his career. One finding was that black coaches who reported having a large number of strong [social ties](#) in their networks were less likely to find

opportunities for career advancement. However, white coaches who reported having many strong social ties were more likely to get new job opportunities.

"Weak social ties are better for black coaches because they indicate a broader range of contacts and, therefore, a broader range of potential opportunities," Day says. "Having weak ties can mean that a coach has contacts that run in many different social circles, so he may be more likely to learn about new job openings." However, most head coaches and coordinators are white, so white assistant coaches with strong ties to other white coaches are more likely to find greater career opportunities, Day says.

This finding is also reflected in research results showing that black coaches with a lot of ties to other black coaches were promoted less often than white coaches with a lot of ties to other white coaches. "Black football coaches improve their chances for professional advancement when they cultivate a diverse range of contacts, rather than focusing on the development of a close-knit network," McDonald says. Day adds that, "These results contradict the common perception that developing a strong network of black coaches will, by itself, lead to greater equality of opportunity in the college ranks."

More information: The research, "Not So Fast, My Friend: Social Capital And The Race Disparity In Promotions Among College Football Coaches," was published online Feb. 5 by Sociological Spectrum.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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