Feeling Disconnected?: the Disparity between Division I and III International and Domestic Student-athletes

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The American sport culture is a constantly changing modern day phenomenon (Guttmann, 2004). Thus, the need to compete or enhance one’s post-collegiate career status is just one of the reasons why athletes participate on the collegiate level (Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009). This phenomenon also transcends its appeal across international lines and is a major reason why there were over 16,400 international student-athletes competing in American universities during the 2007-08 school year (NCAA, 2009). The growth of international student-athletes is clearly represented by the fact that the number has tripled over the last decade (Farrey, 2009). To clarify the meaning of international student-athlete, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) defines a nonresident alien as “an individual that is not a citizen or national of the United States of America who entered through the issuance of visa and does not have the right to remain indefinitely” (2009, p. 7).

International students bring a very different and diverse mindset to American colleges. According to Bevis (2002) and Harrison (2002) international students increase diversity amongst the student populations, while adding novel perspectives to class discussions and raising awareness of cultures. The same assumptions may apply across the field for international student-athletes. Popp (2006) claims that international student-athletes place a greater emphasis on academic success and see competition and mental preparation in sport as less important than their domestic counterparts. This argument is further supported by Guest (2007) whose study focused on cultural meanings and motivation for sport. In this study, the responses of university soccer players in the United States of America and Malawi were compared, and Guest similarly found that American born athletes indicated competition as their primary motivator for participating in intercollegiate athletics whilst the foreign players did not signify competition as a factor. One possible reason for this difference according to Bale (1987) has to do with the quality of high school education and certification in other countries. Additionally, Bale (1987) found some indication that foreign athletes may be brighter than their American counterparts leading to the reason for a greater emphasis on academics. Conclusively, literature suggests motivational differences are prevalent between domestic and international student-athletes, but a gap still exists in explaining the disparities in perceptions and purpose of sport between these two groups. Thus, the intent of this study is to further examine if international student-athletes view the purpose of sport differently than United States born collegiate athletes at NCAA Division III institutions.

Research has continued to explore the perception differences, when Popp et al. (2009) attempted to narrow this literature gap by comparing international and domestic student-athletes’ view of the purpose of sport at the NCAA Division I level. Using a modified version of Duda’s (1989) Purpose of Sport Questionnaire, results indicated that international student-athletes rated the competition portion on the questionnaire considerably lower than American student-athletes. Additionally, it was found that foreign athletes from Western European countries rated good citizenship notably lower than students from Eastern Europe, Central and South America and the United States. Based on these initial findings, limitations and questions still exist as to whether international student-athletes are socialized differently when it comes to sport and sport culture compared to domestic students? As well as, do international student-athletes from under-developed countries perceive the purpose of sport differently then those from developed countries?

While the majority of international students competing at NCAA Division I universities make up the bulk of this unique group, the limitations of the Popp et al. (2009) study were the generalization to all international student-athletes, the data collection by a third party, and the categorization of international student-athletes by political systems. To address these deficiencies we will conduct research at the Division III level and categorize international student-athletes by developed and under-developed countries. The rationale behind using NCAA Division III institutions to test these findings stem from the differences in mission statements and recruiting bylaws. While both Division I and Division III institutions have academic success and equal opportunity for all as their overall objectives,
there is a different emphasis for stated outcomes. Additionally, Division III coaching staffs have no restrictions on the number of off-campus contacts, evaluations, or telephone calls that can be made to recruits (NCAA, 2009a).

According to Siegel (2001), Division I athletic institutions push for national recognition with the ultimate goal of winning and providing high entertainment value to their community. Division III institutions on the other hand devalue the entertainment factor associated with sport and prefer a holistic approach to developing the whole student athlete (Siegel, 2001). This is an issue that needs to be investigated. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine these limitations. The methodology that will be utilized is the replication of the Popp et al. (2009) instrument with the addition of semi-structured interviews for a mixed method approach. Two multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) will be performed. The first will include the factors from the Purpose of Sport Questionnaire representing the dependent variable and the student-athletes’ international or domestic status as the independent variable. These results will then be compared to Popp et al. (2009) findings from the Division I student-athletes. The succeeding phase will use a second MANOVA and the country development category as the independent variable. The implications of the study will build the foundation towards developing a theoretical framework and applying practical applications for the commonalities of the purpose of sport and how they translate to international and domestic student-athlete academic welfare, societal acceptance, team unity and performance. Results will be discussed in the presentation.