Friend or Foe? Student Perceptions Surrounding the Recruitment of International Student-Athletes

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The experiences of students coming from foreign countries to American colleges and universities were summed up as “student alienation,” by Schram and Lauver (1988) and characterized by a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness and social estrangement. Nonetheless, travel of International student athletes (ISA) to American universities have been taking place since the 1950s according to Ridinger and Pastore (2001). Presently, the recruitment of ISAs by American college and universities is at an all time high (Popp, Love, Kim, Hums, 2010) with over 17,000 foreign student athletes registered with the NCAA for the 2008-2009 season (NCAA, 2009). There are numerous reasons why ISAs are courted by US college athletic programs, with the desire to gain and maintain a competitive edge within respective conferences being a major motivation (Riley, 1997). Alternatively ISAs may also be heavily recruited as a “quick fix” for a faulting program (Bale, 1991).

Whatever the incentive, it’s clear that foreign student athletes can be instrumental when building an athletic program, as coaches and administrators are driven by the competitive pressures to win (Ridinger, 1996). However, the very presence of international student athletes on US campuses may elicit some negative behaviors from faculty and even students alike (Lee and Rice, 2007) making this a very difficult transition for the newcomers. Conversely, this negative behavior has not always been a central issue initiated by students or faculty. Back in 1991, the US Track Coaches Association proposed a limit on the amount of financial aid ISAs could receive thus reducing the amount of students that could be recruited (Ridinger and Pastore, 2001). They believed that having foreign student athletes on college teams was not beneficial to the sport or to the success of the local (i.e. American) college athlete. This proposal ran into strong opposition and was eventually defeated. Coaches, as a result, were able to continue with their recruiting patterns.

Additionally, coaches see the recruitment of ISAs as a means of achieving job security (Asher, 1994) and a way of improving their chances of having a winning season. The rationale behind this, according to Rubingh and Broeke (1998), is that ISAs develop their athletic skills in a club based system as opposed to the primarily school based structure for domestic athletes. ISAs tend to be more advanced in their playing abilities and are therefore heavily sought after by coaches. Opposing arguments on recruiting ISAs are made by Hoffer (1994) who claims it is counter productive to bring foreign athletes to our teams. Hoffer offers that abundant resources (coaches, facilities, and money) are utilized towards bringing them (ISAs) here and often, there is no return on this investment. In light of these opposing views and given that research in the area of ISAs is largely limited and unexplored, the proposed study intends to assess the perceptions of American born college students as it pertains to the recruitment of international student athletes. The objective here is to capture the views of the wider American born university population about the presence of this very unique group of individuals on campuses nationwide.

The conceptual framework used to support these occurrences is the neo-racism theory, where discriminative practices find roots in differences of culture and national origin (Barker, 1981; Balibar, 1992; Spears, 1999; Hervik, 2004). Here, justification for discriminative practices comes from cultural differences or differences in national identity rather than physical characteristics alone. This is in an attempt to perpetuate and maintain the ideologies and culture of the dominant group in society. The operationalization element of this doesn’t replace the traditional form of racism but disguises it by promoting exclusion because of cultural attributes. According to Lee and Rice (2007), behaviors such as these can materialize through rejection of admission, skewed athletic or performance assessments, inability to obtain financial assistance or the loss of scholarships. Also, difficulties in forming social alliances with domestic students can be prevalent. This study will examine the last relationship mentioned, which is the perceptions of domestic students towards ISAs and how these perceptions influence their attitude towards recruiting ISAs at their particular institution.

The methodology proposed for this study is a mixed methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis will be applied. Initially, for study 1, data will be collected from a sample of approximately 200 undergraduate students studying sport management at a large university in southeastern United States. Participants will be surveyed using a modified version of a 25 item questionnaire created by Ridinger and Pastore (2001) to examine coaches’ perceptions of recruiting ISAs. This instrument will be used to measure attitudes toward ISAs and perceptions regarding the recruitment of ISAs from American born college students. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) will be used to analyze differences in attitudes and perceptions based on race, national origin, gender, and athletic status. After collecting and analyzing the survey data, semi-structured interviews will be conducted. The goal of study 2, (interviewing participants), will be...
to gain an in-depth understanding of perceptions towards ISAs and to add meaningful insight from the data collected.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that a quantitative approach may limit a study because its focal point is usually on the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables, but not the process. Introducing a qualitative aspect brings a bit of reality to the research process where the emphasis is on how social experiences are created and given meaning. Together, a mixed methods approach can legitimize the findings of this study. The implications of this study will help coaches and administrators better understand the complexities involved with recruiting ISAs and how best to mesh the needs of American born collegiate athletes, ISAs, and the institutions they attend. Results will be discussed in the presentation.