Managing Sport to Reduce Acculturation Stress Among International Students and Promote Intercultural Education

James Anderson, University of Windsor
Brett Bulmer, University of Windsor
Spencer Lightfoot, University of Windsor
Dillon Richardson, University of Windsor
Jules Woolf (Advisor), University of Windsor

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Globalization has created a demand for higher education among students from nations with emerging economies (Naidoo, 2006). Canada is the seventh most popular destination for international students. Nonetheless, 78% of international students want more opportunities to experience Canadian culture and family life, and 58% report that they have little or no Canadian friends (Bradshaw, 2013; Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2013). Moreover, international students often feel isolated and experience acculturation stress (Wei et al., 2007; Zheng & Berry, 1991). The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of international students at a mid-sized Canadian university in relation to being a new international student and the ways in which the management and delivery of sport opportunities may impact acculturation stress and promote intercultural education. The research questions are (1) to what extent do international students feel culturally integrated within the university and host community and (2) what ways can sport be managed and delivered to develop cross-cultural connections and reduce acculturation stress. The study proposes that university sport administrators can manage sport in a way that will foster bridging social capital, subsequently increasing cross-cultural socialization and decreasing acculturation stress. This study is relevant to the study of sport management because the results have implications for sport managers that work in university recreation and athletic departments. Specifically, the results may provide guidelines for ways in which sport managers at universities can provide services and market to international students – a market that Kwon and Trail (2001) argue is currently underdeveloped and underserved.

Review of Literature

Previous research has focused on international student socialization within their host university (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Fritz et al., 2008; Zheng & Berry, 1991), acculturation stress (Wei et al., 2007), motivation to study abroad (Sanchez et al., 2006) and motivation to participate in sport (Heo & Lee, 2007; Lau et al., 2007; Yan & McCullagh, 2004). Incoming international students may have difficulty adjusting to Canadian culture and are susceptible to social isolation, which can result in depression and adversely affect their academic performance (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). International students have difficulty forming relationships with host students (students born in the country in which the university resides) and feel isolated due to socio-cultural differences and social interaction styles (Fritz, et al., 2008; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Moreover, international students from non-western countries, such as China, are more likely to experience higher levels of acculturation stress. This is defined as the unfamiliarity with customs and social norms outside of the student’s country of origin that results in psychosocial stressors such as anxiety, isolation and depression (Wei et al., 2007).

Despite having difficulty forming relations with host students, international students prefer forming relationships with host students than to students of other nations (Kang, 1972). International students who have relationships with host students have a superior adjustment to the host culture (Yeh & Inose, 2003). However, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) suggest that international students form social relationships with other international students who have a similar cultural background or nationality as an adjustment strategy; therefore, international students are prone to develop ethnic communities within the host university. These communities maintain and reproduce cultural customs that act as a buffer to problems associated with a lack of acculturation (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). While it would seem beneficial for international students to develop relations with host students, it appears that these relationships are difficult to develop. Consequently, international students may engage in a strategy of becoming involved with similar others as a means to adapt to the environment, and to deal with acculturation stress.
While the distinct ethic communities that form can be considered as a part of the host university’s multicultural environment, they do not effectively assist with adjustment to local culture, nor do they establish cross-cultural connections (i.e. the exchange of cultural awareness between with the host community and international students). There is a need for intercultural education, as it can diffuse stereotypes, create a shared understanding of cultural differences and perspectives in addition to promoting global citizenship, and thus contributing to a dynamic educational process (James, 2005). One activity that may be beneficial in helping to develop relationships with host students, while also promoting intercultural education is sport.

Sport is considered one way in which people can develop a sense of belonging and social relations among others (Chalip, 2006; Kwon & Trail, 2001). It is suggested that sport is a primary way for groups to experience confirmation or recognition in society. International students who face social barriers while attempting to feel socially connected to the host culture could use sport as a means to overcome these barriers (Weiss, 2001). Sport consumption (whether as a participant or spectator) may lead to an increase in social capital; defined as the networks, group norms and trusts that allow individuals to work together toward common goals (Putnam, 1995). Moreover, ‘bridging capital’ which relates to networks between groups that differ demographically (Putnam, 2001) may also be fostered when sport consumption opportunities are managed in a way that is inclusive. The purpose of this exploratory study was therefore to examine this proposition by investigating the experiences of Chinese international students and the role of sport has played in their lives while at their host institution.

Method

Data collection for this study has started and will be completed before the NASSM conference. This study uses a multi-category focus group design (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The different categories are 1) no involvement in sport, 2) participates in sport, and 3) attends sport events. The rationale to differentiate focus groups by involvement in sport is to make comparisons among groups to determine to what extent involvement in sport (or lack thereof) impacts the university experience. Multiple focus groups will be conducted in each category. The number of groups conducted will be based on theoretical saturation where concepts and insights are well developed and additional data does not meaningfully contribute to the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The focus group method is considered appropriate for exploratory studies (Babbie, 2010) and when the goal is to provide insights into organizational concerns and issues (i.e., international students experience of university life) and as a means for program development (Krueger & Casey, 2009). It is therefore a suitable research method to use for this study.

The ‘questioning route’ (Krueger & Casey, 2009) developed is designed to explore participants’ experience of transitioning to a foreign country along with the challenges they encountered. Adaptation strategies will be explored followed by a discussion on the role of sport in their lives. Questions are designed to understand the university experience of international students and the role that sport may play in building bridging capital and promoting intercultural education. A phenomenological approach will be adopted for this study. Phenomenology describes the personal meaning of lived experiences for individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis will follow recommendations outlined by Corbin & Strauss (2008). This includes data immersion, memo writing, open coding and axial coding of data to develop relationships among concepts. The outcomes of this study may assist university sport managers better serve and target international students, which may improve international students’ experience of the host institution and promote intercultural education.