The Status of International Student-Athletes in Canadian Intercollegiate Sport

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Weston (2006) noted that an achievement-style sport ideology that has characterized American sport has led to the emergence of an “arms race” in American collegiate sport “to recruit top talent internationally, therefore increasing competition among schools to search worldwide for talented players” (p.835). The status of international student-athletes competing in American collegiate sport and the literature surrounding their motivations have been well documented (Weston, 2006; Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009; Love & Kim, 2011). For the 2011-2012 academic year, there were 14,455 “non-resident aliens” competing in all sports across all divisions in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (NCAA, 2011). Thus, the “non-resident alien” demographic represented 3.14% of the total student-athlete population in the NCAA. According to Popp et al. (2009), the largest percentage of international student-athletes participating in the NCAA was from Canada at 28.2% in 2009. Although there is a presence of international student-athletes in Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), the governing body for interuniversity sport in Canada, the status and literature on these athletes do not currently exist. In order to address this gap, the purpose of this study is twofold: (a) to investigate the current status of international student-athletes participating in the Canadian Interuniversity Sport, and (b) to determine the motivational factors of these athletes for migrating to a Canadian academic institution, as well as their experiences.

In designing this study, a review of the literature on international student-athletes in the NCAA was used as a means to provide context and establish an appropriate backdrop for international student-athletes in Canada. Athlete migration theory and the study of global sport systems provide the theoretical background that informs this study. These theoretical concepts bring to light the global processes, which both affect and are affected by the movement of elite sports talent through the international student-athlete. The need to incorporate a global dimension to the study of higher education, particularly intercollegiate athletics, also warrants the investigation of the current status of international student-athletes participating in the CIS, as well as their motivational factors for migrating to a Canadian academic institution.

This study consists of two phases. Due to the fact that the CIS does not monitor the number of international student-athletes competing in a given year, phase one involved a determination of this number for the 2011-12 academic year. This process involved manually navigating through every female and male roster on every university intercollegiate athletic website that was a member of the CIS. If the hometown of a university student-athlete was outside Canada, the international student-athlete’s full name, gender, sport, university, and hometown were recorded and organized into an Excel spreadsheet. Results indicated that 10,852 student-athletes participated in the CIS in 2011-12. Of these athletes, 5,408 were domestic males and 4,864 were domestic females. Moreover, there was a total of 582 international student-athletes (11%) of which 442 were male (8%) and 140 were female (3%). The top three most popular sports for male international student-athletes were soccer (146 athletes), basketball (66 athletes), and football (63 athletes). In contrast, the three most popular sports for female international student-athletes were basketball (32 athletes), soccer (23 athletes), and track and field (22 athletes).

For phase two of the study, semi-structured interviews are being conducted by telephone and/or Skype with a cross-section of international male and female student-athletes from the four regional athletic associations within the CIS. Specifically, two male and two female student-athletes from the sports that have the highest number of international student-athletes for 2011-12 (i.e., soccer and basketball for males, and basketball and soccer for females) were randomly selected and invited to participate (N = 16). The interview guide consists of questions pertaining to their motivations for participation along with their preconceived experiences, preconceived notions regarding the CIS, current perceptions of the CIS, and finally, reasons for enrolment in a Canadian university.

With the growing trend and interest towards internationalization on university campuses and the importance of providing students with an international perspective, this study will provide university institutions and their interuniversity athletics programs with in-depth knowledge on the motives of international student-athletes and
perspectives of their experiences. This information may assist athletic directors and coaches in attracting and recruiting international student athletes. Furthermore, this study will provide direction to the CIS regarding ways to enrich the international student-athlete experience and the post-secondary education experience in general.

References


