International Student-Athletes’ Transition to College: Unveiling the Unique Struggle of a Special Population and Providing Solutions for Better Support

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While the front-facing image of intercollegiate athletics – particularly at the Division I level – is one of quasi-professionalism, with superstar athletes and coaches, the majority of the student-athlete population looks far different. Rather than elite football and men’s basketball players, the large majority of student-athletes compete in non-revenue sports, and includes a growing population of international competitors. Previous literature has been devoted to studying student-athletes in various capacities as both the student and athlete (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007; Reiter, Liput, & Nirmal, 2007), although most of this research focuses very generally on advising and counseling the entire student-athlete population (Boughton & Neyer, 2001; Charrtrand & Lent, 1987; Erzel, Ferrante, & Pinkney, 1996; Hinkle, 1994; Hurley & Cunningham, 1984). Very little has been done to study the international student-athlete (ISA), with a few studies addressing transitional issues faced by student-athletes generally (Meadows, Pierce, & Popp, 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000). However, these studies are limited in number, and most of those that do exist are mostly qualitative or deal with very small sample sizes.

Despite this, there is a growing population of ISAs on American university campuses. In the 2012-13 academic year, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported that 8,653 of the 186,640 Division I student-athletes were international, making up roughly 4.6% of the total student-athlete population (NCAA, 2013). In some sports, that percentage was much higher (e.g., in men’s tennis, 33.2% of the student-athletes were international). For schools in conferences that sponsor not only a large number of individual sports, but also, Olympic sports in which ISAs tend to participate (e.g., Big Ten, Pac-12), how to best integrate this special population into the American higher educational experience is of great importance. Understanding what factors impact the international student-athlete’s success and decision to matriculate from an institution is critical.

Additionally, to recruit and retain an ISA – like any student-athlete – costs money. From the official visit to the offer of full or partial scholarships for sport competition at the Division I level, institutions that pursue ISAs make a substantial financial investment. As of 2012, the NCAA reported that Division I institutions spent on average between $36,000 per student-athlete (i.e., average for NCAA Football Championship Subdivision [FCS] schools) and $102,000 (i.e., average for NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision [FBS] schools) per student-athlete (Fulks, 2013). A 2012 New York Times article found international students can pay as much as three times as much as in-state domestic students do in tuition and fees at American public universities (Lewin, 2012). The 2012 NCAA If university athletic departments are paying at least part of the tuition, room, and board bill for ISAs, the investment is substantially more than investing in a domestic student-athlete. Therefore, the success and retention of ISAs should be of great importance to the college athletic department and university.

So how do Division I athletic departments best support this special population? Existing literature seems to favor a targeted and comprehensive model via a specialized advising and a support services office (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Clark & Parette, 2002; Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1984; O’Banion, 1972). By promoting a developmental advising approach to academic advisors who work with ISAs (Broughton & Neyer, 2011; O’Banion, 1972) and utilizing advisors to promote support services across campus, universities can better support and promote success amongst this special population.

This ongoing study is an attempt to identify the unique issues that impact the ISA population during their transition to college by utilizing a survey developed through the first study in this series of two. Using Delphi expert consensus, a panel comprised of international student-athletes, domestic student-athletes on teams with a high percentage of international participants, a sport psychologist, athletic trainer, head coaches, athletic academic counselors, and a practitioner from the office of international affairs. Through a series of four surveys, the “experts” on the ISA population developed a final set of questions that was sent to a sample of 100 ISAs, 100 domestic student-athletes,
and 100 international students. The participants are all from a large, Midwestern institution that participates in NCAA Division I athletics. All international student-athletes at the university were sampled, with stratified random sampling techniques used for the other two groups in order to select samples that were similar in terms of sport participation and country of origin.

The results of this survey will be analyzed using Chi-square tests, contingency tables, and Cramer’s V. All will be utilized as methods of bivariate analysis on individual items. Mean differences between groups will be evaluated for significance in order to determine which of the items on the survey were significant for only the ISA population in order to identify those transitional issues which are unique to that specific population.

Those issues identified will then be utilized to create an advising and support model for better support that can be employed by athletic departments in order to better support this growing population from recruitment through graduation. This study is limited to one institution, so the initial results may not be applicable to the wider ISA population in all of Division I. However, the goal is to obtain initial results from one university in order to ascertain whether or not this is a truly unique population deserving of additional or specialized support when entering U.S. higher education, and the selected university is one that has a large student-athlete, ISA, and international student population, which provides a larger and more diverse sample size than some other NCAA Division I institutions. This study will allow practitioners to utilize the results, and pilot the suggested programming in order to see if the specific interventions recommended alleviate some of the issues identified by the ISA population.