As a consequence of globalization, athlete’s migration has largely increased in the past 60 years (Bale, 1991). Especially, young athletes that finished their high school education, and attempt to continue a competitive practice of the sport while attending college are more likely to migrate to the USA (Bale, 1991). Most of them are drawn to the United States, as the intercollegiate system is very conducive to combining an education and competing at the highest levels. The level of competition has driven colleges to invest in equipment, state of the art facilities, top coaching staff, scholarships for elite athletes, and many supporting services, such as tutoring, academic guidance, and medical care. Every year billions of dollars are spent on college athletics (Mayyasi, 2013). The pressure to win has grown overwhelmingly. Coaches and administrators are always searching for an athletic edge (Wieberg, 2008). There are limited numbers of American athletes that have the skills to have an impact at the collegiate level, and the competition to attract these top domestic players is immense, so coaches turn to larger, international recruiting arenas with less competition (Riley, 1997).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulates US collegiate athletics and the recruitment procedures for domestic and international student-athletes (ISA). It was only since the legalization of athletic scholarships in the 1950s that the influx of foreign student athletes became significant (Bale, 1999). The NCAA defines an ISA as a nonresident alien, which requires the athlete to have a temporary visa that will expire at a specific point in time. The latest race and ethnicity report from the NCAA indicates that over 17,653 International Student Athletes (ISAs) were playing for NCAA member institutions in 2009–2010 (NCAA, 2010). This represents 10.24% of the total number of student-athletes participating in all Divisions of the NCAA during 2009 – 2010. The ISAs’ participation has been constantly increasing through the years. Nevertheless, despite these growing numbers and the importance of ISAs to the performance of the athletic departments, little research has been done to understand how these athletes end up in the United States and what coaches and/or athletic departments can do to recruit the right ISAs. Therefore, the present study will examine the recruiting process of ISAs by exploring the following questions:

- What common approaches do coaches use to recruit ISAs?
- Can the “social network” be compared to “talent pipeline” as a recruiting tool?
- How valuable is a coach’s social network in the process of recruiting ISAs?

This is a qualitative study that used semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 coaches and 10 ISAs of selected Division I and II NCAA member institutions in the state of South Carolina. Using a maximum variation sampling, the coaches and ISAs were selected from public and private universities; Division I, and II; top/medium/low programs; men’s and women’s programs in four specific sports, tennis, soccer, golf and basketball. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and using conventional content analysis the transcripts were coded for emergent themes. A qualitative computer software program, NVivo was used for codebook organization.

Interpretative bias was reduced by including an analyst not involved in data collection. The researcher engaged in continuous reflexivity throughout the planning, analysis, and interpretation stages to reduce bias (Adamson & Donovan, 2002) Based on the results the author created an emerging model that describes the recruiting process of ISAs from the perspective of the Coaches and ISAs. Common trends grouped by level of competition were found. Results indicated that there are at least 8 methods used by coaches to identify elite ISAs; however the coach’s personal network is their main tool. Previously known as the “talent pipeline”, personal connections have evolved and expanded to become a Social Network. Depending on the level of competition there is a distinction in the use of the Network. Major Division I programs have greater recruiting resources and prefer to do personal-recruitment of ISAs by attending International Tournaments. These coaches use the Network as an evaluation tool. On the contrary, Division I-AA and AAA and Division II coaches rely heavily on their network during the ISA recruiting process.
The other methods for ISAs recruiting are: direct contact through email, agencies, academies, showcases, U.S. college transfers and U.S. high schools. Additionally, the experience of the coach also had an influence on how the Network was used. Older coaches tend to rely greatly on their well-established network as opposed to younger coaches who use academies, agencies, and showcases as an alternative way to identify ISAs, while they increase and fortify their network. The recruiting success rate is similar for international and domestic athletes according to the information provided by coaches during the interviews. The only exception to the rate is when the ISA has been recommended by the coach’s personal network; then the probability of the ISA committing to the institution is approximately 100%. Finally, the network usually brings together athletes from the same country or same background; nonetheless networks extend beyond one country’s limits and can easily cover zones of the world. Base on the data from the athletic web page of each institution, the majority of ISAs in South Carolina are originally from 6 countries including but not limited to Canada, Germany, England, Brazil, France and Australia.

Further research should be conducted on the efficiency of ISAs’ athletic contribution and the marginal revenue product of ISAs in NCAA Collegiate Athletics. Additionally, it would be important to examine the effectiveness of the coach’s Social Network vs. Sports Agencies, in recruiting successful ISAs that will have a positive impact at their Institution.