"I Don't Know What I'm Doing": International Student Athletes and their Transition to American Universities

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Student athletes make a positive impact both at the universities in which they compete, and broadly within their communities (Gazley, Littlepage, & Bennett, 2012). Embedded within this group of over 460,000 student athletes resides a unique and under-served population of over 20,000 international student athletes (ISA) (NCAA, 2019). ISA face many of the same challenges as domestic student athletes, but have to tackle additional obstacles and roadblocks associated with being an international student (Yao & Mwangi, 2017).

Institutions offer resources to help meet both the academic and athletic needs of student athletes, but there remains a need for research focusing on whether those resources meet the specific needs of ISA (Newell, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) explore whether the resources currently in place are meeting the needs of ISA as they transition to life at an American university; and (2) gain a richer understanding of specific challenges ISA face and their perceptions of how those challenges are currently met by their university. The current study, in partnership with the athletic department of a mid-major Southeastern university, is part of an ongoing larger study exploring these challenges for both domestic and ISA student athletes.

Researchers utilized a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of ISA transitions and their perceptions of available resources. Specifically, this study leveraged a phenomenological approach which allowed the participants to openly share their perspectives and give meaning to their experiences as ISA (Creswell, 2012). Researchers completed focus group sessions with 14 ISA, currently competing at the NCAA Division I level. Each focus group followed a semi-structured interview format which explored their current or past experiences transitioning to life in the U.S., as well as their experience taking part in a mandated life skills course for all student athletes.

Ongoing data analysis has, and will consist of, transcribing focus group interviews verbatim followed by an open coding procedure. After coding independently, the coding team, consisting of four researchers, will together compare initial codes developed during open coding, leading to more focused coding, allowing for themes to emerge (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2013).

Results of the study are expected to contribute to a more extensive understanding of issues directly related to the unique transition which ISA experience. Focus groups with the first 14 participants yielded the following emergent themes: the importance of teammates, adjustment to everyday American life, academic unfamiliarity, discontent with current resources, and disconnects in communication processes. Themes will continue to evolve as data collection and analysis proceeds.

The lived experiences of these ISA will be used to inform and improve the current life skills course at the university. Researchers expect the results could be used to improve the experiences of many of the 20,000 ISA facing similar issues, since a majority of ISA choose mid-major institutions (Chepyator-Thompson, Turcott, & Smith, 2016). The broader implications include continued partnership with athletics to create a more holistic program that serves all student athletes at the university and beyond.