

Adapting to life in a different world – foreign student athletes' acculturation to college in the United States

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Introduction and theoretical background

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reports that it has more international student-athletes than ever before, with a number totaling approximately 460,000 (NCAA, 2014). The percentage of foreign players in many Division I sports has doubled since the beginning of this decade, and the number will continue to grow. In fact, some teams are now composed entirely of foreign players (Wilson & Wolverton, 2008).

In comparison to other foreign students, student-athletes face the adjustment to the American college and the demands of their sports team in conjunction with the expectation to fulfill academic requirements in order to keep their scholarships (Killeya-Jones, 2005). For many foreign athletes the act of losing their scholarships would imply the inability to proceed with their education due to financial reasons and a return to their home countries.

People underestimate how difficult adjustment is under these circumstances. For example, Wolverton (2008) reported that a field hockey player and junior at Harvard University, who was born in the Netherlands, grew up in Malaysia, lived in Belgium for a while, and went to high school in Hong Kong, felt prepared for the academic rigors, but the social transition was more difficult than she expected. Even though the labor migration of athletes performing in top level sports has become a constant, neither the adjustment process of incoming foreign athletes is understood, nor how this process is interrelated with the student athletes' athletic and academic performance (Agergaard & Botelho, 2010). Hence, the goal of this study was to fill this important gap.

Aim of paper – research question

This study identified the personal and cultural processes taking place when foreign student-athletes moved to the United States, and examined, in particular, their main challenges. Exploratory in nature, this study addressed the following research question "How do foreign student-athletes adapt to host and Division I team culture?"

Methodology

Since recently recruited foreign student players who would be new to the host culture were central to this study, the author purposefully selected student-athletes located at three Division I universities, the highest competitive league level in college sports. The author chose student athletes at a Research I university in a city center with a strong sports tradition, a comprehensive university in the suburbs, and a public university in the countryside. In total, the study sample included 18 foreign student-athletes (five women and thirteen men). They were all in their first semester, and none of them had ever lived abroad before. Their countries of origin were Australia, Brazil, Colombia, England, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Russia, Spain, and South Africa. These student-athletes had participated in football, golf, soccer, swimming, tennis, and track and field.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how the student athletes were interpreting, negotiating, and understanding their experiences. Since three of the student athletes returned home for personal reasons, and three others did not respond to inquiries for a follow-up interview, 18 student athletes were

interviewed in the first round and 12 in the second round with a total of 30 semi-structured interviews.

To establish causal relationships within the acculturation process, the author applied thematic analysis in NVIVO to identify similarities and differences between different student athletes' acculturation. Primary codes were set up in accordance with findings from former studies about the acculturation of foreign students and foreign business persons. The author also coded inductively to explore aspects which had not directly emerged from earlier studies. Respondent validation was applied whereas the author provided the student athletes with a chunk of her findings to ensure a good correspondence between the findings and their perspectives. To identify and analyze discrepant data, rival explanations were addressed in order to avoid incorrect assumptions. A detailed research protocol ensured that the data collection procedure could be repeated and would have similar results.

Results, discussion and implications (excerpt)

While most student-athletes did not have any previous intercultural experiences, they were very engaged in their host culture by taking classes, living on campus, and sharing a room or apartment with an American and/or other international peer(s). According to Sam and Berry (2006), this contact seems to explain their significant progression in their cultural learning that the majority of student-athletes were consciously aware of. They noticed cultural differences on a fairly deep level, deepened their knowledge of the culture and seemed to make efforts, on a conscious level, to integrate themselves in the new team and host culture.

Even though the majority of student-athletes did not face homesickness, injured athletes did. Since stressful experiences may become risk factors for serious adjustment difficulties, even to the point of depression (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004), the author recommends inclusion in extraneous team activities, especially during periods of inactivity due to injury or during the off-season.

Most student athletes indicated that their main stressors related to extremely busy schedules and resolving potential role conflicts between being students and athletes, especially since their eligibility to participate in sporting competitions was contingent on their academic grades (NCAA, 2014). Their stress level was multiplied due to their struggle with language difficulties in classwork and a lack of time to improve their language skills. The fact that the student-athletes who struggled with English the most returned home may imply that once a low level of fluency has been identified, extra support in the form of tutoring should be made mandatory to increase proficiency as rapidly as possible. Furthermore, the author proposes that the university should put more emphasis on developing a solution for the apparent conflict between the two roles. The reality of multiple practices and time-consuming competitions in conjunction with academic responsibilities in a foreign language has evolved into a schedule that seems to be easily overwhelming.

References

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