

(SP) INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-ATHLETE ADJUSTMENT TO U.S. UNIVERSITIES: TESTING THE RIDINGER AND PASTORE ADJUSTMENT MODEL

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Introduction

According to the most recent information published by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), over 10,000 of its student-athletes were born outside the United States (NCAA, 2005). These student-athletes often help their teams to conference and national titles (Brown, 2004; Litsky, 2003). Little research exists, however, examining what life on campus is like for international student-athletes. The goal of this study is to examine the adjustments made by international student-athletes at U.S. universities.

Few researchers have examined the phenomena of international student-athletes. Bale (1987) examined how international student-athletes made migration decisions and he comprehensively documented the history of international recruitment of college athletes and their experiences on U.S. campuses (1991). Stidwell (1984) looked at differences of athletic motivation between domestic and international college track and field athletes, citing a significant difference in perceived athletic confidence. Ridinger (1998) compared antecedents and outcomes of adjustments made by four different groups: (a) domestic students, (b) international students, (c) domestic student-athletes, and (d) international student-athletes, at a single university. In her work, international student-athletes scored significantly higher on social, academic, and athletic adjustment scales than the other three groups. An additional study (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000), developed a conceptual framework to assess antecedent factors and adjustment levels of international student-athletes, but the model was not tested, forming the basis of this study.

The Ridinger and Pastore model outlined four antecedent dimensions: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, (c) perceptual, and (d) cultural distance, which influenced particular adjustments and outcomes of international student-athletes. The researchers suggested specific adjustments of: (a) academic, (b) social, (c) athletic, (d) personal-emotional, and (e) institutional, and outlined two outcome levels of satisfaction and performance.

Methods

The current study takes a qualitative approach to this research problem. Three international student-athletes attending an NCAA Division I institution were purposively selected as participants. Criteria for selection included a strong understanding of English, geographically diverse home nations, gender, and sport played. The researcher employed a phenomenological approach with each participant undergoing a series of three semi-structured interviews. As suggested by Seidman (1998), the interviewer focused the first session on life history of the participant, the second elaborated details of the history, and the third reflected on meaning of the experience. After each data collection session, interviews were transcribed, coded, analyzed for themes, and categorized. This process of constant comparative analysis allowed the researcher to develop new questions and probes as data and themes emerged (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

For the most part, data supported the model. As suggested by Bale (1991), international student-athletes came into the U.S. with outstanding educational as well as athletic preparation. Acceptance by teammates played a crucial role in ease of adjustment, emerging as a more relevant antecedent factor than relationships with professors, coaches or athletics staff. Results of the current study also revealed that international student-athletes were much more aware of what to expect of the U.S. college experience, athletically, socially, and academically, compared to the subjects in Bale's research. Participants did indicate confusion regarding NCAA regulations. Cultural distance, as suggested by Ridinger and Pastore (2000) also played a role, but was found to be less significant, simply changing the steepness of cross-cultural U-curve adjustment, as suggested by Adler (1975). Other antecedent factors did emerge, suggesting additions to the Ridinger and Pastore model. Family support was critical to all participants' ability to adjust, but was absent from the conceptual framework. In addition, a sense of adventure, open-mindedness, and previous travel experience also played antecedent roles, as other cross-cultural research has suggested (Craven, 1994; Chapdelaine & Alextich, 2004).

Participants indicated several athletic adjustments including where the experience fit in their future athletic goals, weight training regimens, and mental approach. Academic adjustments were not difficult for participants for several reasons. All participants were very satisfied with their experiences and all aspired to continue elite athletic participation abroad after graduation; a goal enhanced by their competitive experience in the U.S.

Discussion

This work has relevance for college athletics administrators, coaches, recruiters, and international student-athletes themselves. Understanding cross-cultural adjustment for international student-athletes will ease transitions, enhance experience, and potentially improve performance. This work also opens the door to future research regarding comparative international sport policy and elite athlete transition experience.

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