

Successfully Assimilating International Student-Athletes in the College Setting

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Abstract Research has focused on the process of assimilation that international student-athletes experience when they move to a different country to play their sport as well as continue their education. What mechanisms do these athletes develop and implement to facilitate or ease their experience while going through this process? What opportunities do their new environments provide them to assist with this process? In the present study, ten international athletes were interviewed on their personal experience through this process of assimilation to the United States college setting as student-athletes and conclusions have been drawn regarding what helped them overcome this stage of assimilation and what added more stress to this process. This research will focus on the challenges that international student-athletes face when arriving in college in the United States and what they can do to overcome these challenges, as well as what colleges can do to provide support. Key recommendations to improve integration and accommodations into the American collegiate academic and athletic campus culture are presented.

Keywords: *international student-athletes, assimilation, college campuses*

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1. Introduction and Background

In 2018, there were 1.1 million international students enrolled in US colleges, which is 1.5% higher than the previous year, according to the Open Doors Report, an annual survey conducted by the Institute of International Education [1]. Out of the 460,000 student-athletes currently participating in a total of twenty-four different sports, approximately 4% (20,000 students) are international student-athletes, according to the NCAA official website. According to the demographics of the NCAA student-athletes data poll [2], the percentage of international student-athletes is about the same as most of the other minorities represented within this entity, only surpassed by African Americans and Latinos [2].

International students who integrate into the US college setting endure psychological and sociological stresses, and language barriers. Past research focusing on this subject in several areas, such as the psychological and sociological factors affecting international students, the reasons why students decide to commit to a college in a different country, or the adaptation process that they undergo as they establish themselves in this country, is lacking [3,4]. When the psychological and sociological dynamics are considered, there are three different stages that professional players or student-athletes experience when moving to a different country: i) the transition from

one country to another and the process of how they accomplish this; ii) the establishment within the new culture, which is the focus of this study; iii) and the termination of the professional or athletic career [5]. In particular, regarding the establishment phase, "multiple embeddedness" refers to the process in which athletic migrants create and establish connections and networks in various contexts simultaneously, i.e., both back home and in their new environment. In addition, "acute cultural adaption" is the open-ended process of negotiation between maintaining a subjective sense of wellbeing and participating in acculturative everyday practices [5].

There is a direct correlation between cultural intelligence and social support, and both are positively correlated to cross-cultural adaptation [6]. Cross-cultural adaptation occurs when individuals switch to host cultures from their original cultures. Cultural intelligence is the ability of the individual to effectively communicate with people from other cultures. Social support includes all the factors that help individuals get closer to others by reducing their anxiety in new cultures [6]. It has further been observed that social support has a buffering effect on acculturative stress as well [7]. The correlation between participation in leisure activities, with sports being one of the most important ones, and social events is critical to a successful transition to a college campus in the US. These two elements, along with the establishment of a social network, are key determinant factors in predicting successful adjustment to college [7]. There is evidence of

the considerable expansion of the enrollment numbers of international students in US higher education and that these students undergo a process of acculturation that is complex, dynamic, and multidimensional. Furthermore, the authors expand on the idea that the ability to communicate is yet another determinant factor in the adaptation process for these incoming international students [7].

The two most important reasons why international student-athletes decide to enroll in a US college are i) the possibility of earning a higher education diploma while competing in a high-level, or almost professional, athletic environment, which is nearly unattainable in most countries around the world; and ii) the temptation of scholarships offered to athletes in their respective sports. The combination of academics and athletics seems to be the most attractive characteristic out of this US college experience bringing in more and more international student-athletes every year [3, 4].

Several factors affect international student-athletes when going through the process of adapting to their new environments. Some of the most important factors are language, food, administrative hurdles, issues with coaches, the new culture, and the mandated early arrival when college campuses are empty [8]. It has been discovered that the factors that help reduce stress among international student-athletes are athletic performance in general and simply participating in their sport. This combination appears to positively influence variables that contribute to a happier existence for these athletes, as well as the connection with people who have been through similar situations, meaning other international athletes and teammates [8]. This relationship with other internationals is what creates the so-called international groups or communities within colleges universities.

The purpose of this study was to interview a sample of ten international student-athletes to examine their academic and athletic perspectives and experiences in the US college setting.

2. Methods

Each participant was interviewed without collecting any self-identifying information. The sample included ten student-athletes representing four different sports, seven males and three females, from nine different countries (France, Germany, Dominican Republic, Greece, Spain, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Lithuania), who speak a total of seven different languages, and had attended a small private liberal arts university in Upstate South Carolina from one to six semesters. One out of ten students at this particular university is an international student-athlete. The age range for these student-athletes was nineteen to twenty-three years old. All the interviewees are non-native English speakers, although one claimed to be confident in English due to his upbringing in an English-speaking country. Lastly, seven out of ten participants mentioned that they had never visited the US before attending college. The athletes were asked a wide variety of questions regarding their experiences since arriving in the US and the different

factors, or situations, experienced as a student-athlete. The following questions were asked to each participant:

- 1) Have you ever traveled or visited the US before attending college in the country?
- 2) How fluent were you in the language, English, when you arrived here for the first time?
- 3) Would you say you had issues communicating with others and expressing yourself freely and how did that make you feel?
- 4) Have you ever had a conversation in English with a native English speaker before and, if not, how was your experience using English for the first time when you came to the US?
- 5) How did you feel when you realized that you had to start living your life entirely in English?
- 6) What were your first impressions of the US?
- 7) What were your impressions of your school and the city where it is located?
- 8) Did those impressions change after living in the US for a few months and, if so, what changed?
- 9) What was the reason, or reasons, why you decided to come to the US as a student-athlete?
- 10) How would you describe your relationship with the faculty and staff members working at your institution?
- 11) Would you say that these relationships were positive and helpful to you as you adapted to your new environment?
- 12) How was, and how is, your relationship with your coach and teammates?
- 13) How have these relationships within your sport evolved after attending college here for a few months?
- 14) How would you describe the process of adaptation that you went through within your sport and what did it mean to you?

Each interview was individual and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. None of the conversations were recorded to allow each person partaking in the study to speak freely without any reservations. The interviewer took notes on what was said and the outlook on being a student-athlete in the US. The data was then examined.

3. Results

When asked about their reasons to attend college in the US, six out of ten claimed that it was due to the possibility of combining sports and higher education, something that they could not accomplish back home due to a lack of sports scholarships. On a similar note, three out of ten, specifically, claimed that they were here for the experience, or adventure, that they wanted to see what the "American life" was like, and to confirm what they had seen in movies and TV shows.

When asked about their experiences when communicating with the student body or the American people at large, half of them claimed to have had some sort of issue; specifically, they felt that they were missing correct words or phrases to express what they wanted to say. Two of these international student-athletes affirmed that they came to the US with bare knowledge of the language and were lost in the beginning. These issues with their language skills made some of them feel like they could not

be themselves; hence, they could not interact with people and create any sort of relationships, causing emotional problems such as depression, loneliness, frustration, and fear. Other emotions expressed by the participants were shyness and stress, both mental and emotional. The participants also identified specific dialects and accents that were more troublesome to understand, which were the southern accent, the British accent, and African American accent.

The interviewees were, also, asked about their first impressions of their higher education institution and the US in general. First, five out of ten claimed to have had some sort of cultural shock, which could be due to the different food, culture, the way people behave, and the way the US system works. Second, fifty percent of the student-athletes interviewed mentioned they liked their small college environment since they could establish better and deeper connections with other students, as well as closer relationships with professors, making the classroom experience less stressful. Third, four out of ten mentioned that they felt the people working for their university were very nice, welcoming, and helpful; this was something that they were not expecting but was a pleasant surprise to them. Lastly, three out of ten commented on their feelings when they first arrived in the country. They said that they experienced a full range of positive emotions, such as amusement, shock, joy, contentment, and happiness.

After spending a few months in the same place, people tend to develop and change their initial perspectives on certain situations and environments, and, similarly, these interviewed students mentioned three important ideas about how their perspectives and experiences evolved with time. First, most of them mentioned that whenever their English proficiency level improved to a point in which they could hold basic conversations with people, most of their respective issues were resolved or diminished. Thus, they now had the communication skills to address these situations and were able to adapt to them. Second, four out of ten claimed they became used to the lifestyle of a US college campus. They established their routines and started to feel comfortable with their day-to-day activities. Third, half of them mentioned that their experiences in college radically changed when they finally understood the way the college system works at their school in the US, including administration, the way people behave, who they must talk to whenever they need something, and other areas that make life easier for them.

When asked if there was something specific that was difficult to adapt to, the responses of these student-athletes varied but fell within the following parameters. Most of the participants mentioned specifics such as language, lifestyle, food, people, and culture. One highlighted trend among the participants was that, even though their respective level of proficiency in English seemed to be good relatively good when they were practicing back home, this was not enough for them to effectively begin and carry on with their lives in the US where they had to live entirely in English. Most of them agreed that this was probably due to the fact that they lacked exposure to the language and they only were able to practice it a few hours a week. On a similar note, regarding food issues, most of the interviewees mentioned experiencing severe

stomach problems during the first few months, which posed a great challenge for them in the beginning.

Lastly, participants stated that they felt discriminated against by their coaches, and/or teammates during their first few months at school and their first sport season. The main issue was that these players, which were used to different playing styles and strategies that are not applied in the US, were struggling to adapt to their new cultural norms and the American mentality of training and competing in sports. Most of those interviewed agreed that this was mostly an issue of miscommunication among parties and that their coaches viewed them as threats to their power positions within the team. According to the perception of several international student-athletes, instead of the coaches helping the international athletes understand how they wanted them to play and encourage them to apply their athletic skills and mentality, they were treated as if they came to the US to play by their own rules and to change the entire concept of the sport within the team. When asked about the relationship this sample group had with their respective coaches, six out of ten claimed to have a bad relationship with them, and even the most optimistic ones claimed to maintain merely a professional relationship with them.

Essentially, these student-athletes commented that they restrained themselves to just do as they are told while keeping their opinions and knowledge to themselves. This is utterly detrimental; instead of adding their respective knowledge and experiences of the game to their teams in the US, they felt discouraged by their peers and coaches to interject any of their ideas into the team system. Nevertheless, this sample group, further, mentioned they had a great relationship with the overall academic faculty and staff from their university, and that these were usually helpful and caring, which made them feel a bit more at home in their US college environment.

4. Discussion

The results of the interviews showed similarities with regards to i) the combination of academics and athletics as the main factor to decide to enroll in a US college; ii) the cultural shock experienced; iii) the struggles suffered due to the use of the English language; iv) the issues experienced within their respective sports, both with their teammates and coaches; and v) the fact that the different positive relationships built with people such as faculty, staff, teammates, and other students made the process of adaptation faster and smoother for them. Most of these athletes mentioned that when their language proficiency improved, they were able to communicate more effectively and create better relationships with everyone around them, as well as improving their performance in academics and athletics. They claimed that this allowed them to feel more successfully involved with the groups that they were trying to adapt to.

Overall, the main issue brought up by the international student-athletes was the negative, and often tense, relationship with their coaches. The students interviewed claimed that this was mostly due to negative attitudes from both sides, as well as poor communication caused by the seemingly uninterested or offended coaches and the

poor language proficiency level of the athletes. Whenever the athletes developed stronger communication skills, they stated that most of these frictions with their coaches significantly diminished.

There was one significant difference between the findings from the interviews and the existing research. The faculty and staff at this university seemed to be helpful throughout the process of adaptation to the US and college life due to their positive behavior and attitude towards international student-athletes. This does not seem to be a recurring factor in many US colleges and it is, in fact, highly encouraged by different researchers as a measure to reduce the level of stress that these students, and student-athletes, experience through their process of assimilation into their new environment [8]. In addition, social activities that were available to the students also helped with this assimilation process, both on and off-campus.

It is important to note that our sample size is small and that further research including significantly more participants is required to arrive at definitive conclusions about assimilating international students into the college setting.

5. Recommendations

As a result of the feedback and the various observations made throughout the interviews, we provide seven recommendations to help improve the assimilation of international college student-athletes into the US college system.

1. Implement an administrative collegiate team that can more attentively educate the international students regarding important logistics within the college academic system. More specifically, the students interviewed mentioned that they regret not knowing some of the things they currently know. For example, how many classes they can take each semester without paying additional fees, what opportunities are available to them (jobs, internships, major and minor studies), what are the different housing and meal options offered, what types of examinations are there available for them to test out of certain classes, and who are the school contact representatives to meet their specific needs. A recurrent characteristic among these international students is that either due to financial issues or issues with their embassies and VISAs, they all need to finish their education in four years or less. Most of the participants revealed that if they had known better at the beginning of their educational journey, they would have taken more classes to speed up the process of graduation and obtain more credits faster.
2. Support and facilitate communication with international students, at least until they reach a certain level of fluency in the English language and until they report feeling comfortable enough in the language. This suggestion is mostly targeted to coaches due to the miscommunication and misunderstanding that can occur between them and the students. To be effective, both points of view need to be understood.

For coaches, it is a risk to bring an athlete from overseas since, most likely, they only know them through highlight reels and grade reports. Thus, it is not out of the ordinary for coaches to expect the athletes to be able to communicate English at some basic level. However, it is also a complicated situation for the athletes transitioning into the US. They must change their entire mindset and environment. Consequently, they make the greater adjustment. Mutual respect and understanding between both sides will make the situation easier and less stressful for everyone, as well as more productive for the team since the players can perform better on the field, court, or track.

3. Coaches should try to be more embracing and understanding of the diversity of athletes that play a sport and study abroad. They should work harder and intently focus on explaining to the athletes why they want them to play in a certain way and how their playing and coaching styles intertwine harmoniously together. This is not intended to place all the pressure and responsibility on one side but rather to create awareness of this potentially unproductive dynamic and to aid coaches to be open for improvement.
4. There seems to be a correlation between the enjoyment level and stress-free adjustment to the new environment. This could be facilitated by offering several activities to international student-athletes. Such activities could be anything that involves internationals getting to know their new community on and off-campus, therefore creating fruitful relationships and immersing themselves within their new environment (e.g., movie nights, skate nights, game nights, and free tickets for events and venues, etc.).
5. Celebrate the stories of international students. Let their life journey be heard and appreciated. Learn from other students' diversity of thought, background, and outlook. Respect differences of beliefs and opinions and focus on the positive attributes of other people, especially in new environments. Do not be afraid to learn and ask questions about people you may not be as comfortable with initially due to different cultures and ethnicities. People have more in common than the differences they share. Revel in the human team spirit!

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to understand that although the focus of this research is on international students, everyone goes through an assimilation process when transitioning into the college environment and starting a new life on campus. Therefore, recommendations and observations mentioned throughout the paper do not only apply to international students but everyone else as well, to a lesser or greater extent. That is why it is important to pay attention to the challenging indicators expressed in these interviews with the goal of always improving the college experience for everyone enrolled in our schools.

As students, we all desire the same understanding, cooperation, and critical accommodations. Students want to feel like they belong and contribute to something bigger than themselves. There is the basic psychological “need for attachment” among human beings, as described by psychotherapeutic researcher Klaus Grawe, that should always be nurtured and cared for responsibly [9].

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