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Abstract

International athletes constitute a significant demographic within NCAA Division I athletics, offering diverse cultural perspectives and often enhancing team performance. Despite the documented importance of social support structures in facilitating their sociocultural adaptation, the role of institutional and organizational support remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the experiential satisfaction of international athletes competing in NCAA Division I sports, with a particular focus on their perceptions of institutional and organizational support. Utilizing a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 international athletes across multiple NCAA Division I institutions. The findings reveal varying degrees of dissatisfaction, particularly with institutional support, which appears to influence the athletes' overall experiences and their willingness to recommend NCAA participation to prospective international athletes. These insights suggest a need for NCAA institutions to reassess their support structures to better serve their international athlete populations and sustain their competitive advantage on a global scale.

Keywords: athletic transition, recruiting, athlete satisfaction

More than 21,000 international college athletes migrate to the United States (US) to participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sanctioned sports each year (NCAA, 2023). As international athletes are often defined as being skilled workers (Elliott & Maguire 2008; Parrish et al., 2020; Sage, 2010), this specific pattern has been referred to as sport labor migration. Migration patterns are a consequence of opportunity (e.g., education, employment; Iredale, 2001; Sage, 2010) and research has demonstrated that international college athletes choose to study in the US for varying opportunistic reasons (e.g., educational offerings, access to facilities, access to professional coaches; Butler et al., 2019; Popp et al., 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2013). Further, studies have shown the importance of social support (e.g., team, coaches) as international college athletes transition to institutions of higher education in the US (see Charitonoidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Jolly et al., 2022; Manwell et al., 2021; and Popp et al., 2010, for a complete review).

Although these studies illustrate the importance of social support with regards to international college athletes' experiential satisfaction competing in NCAA athletics and attending college in the US, research regarding the impact of institutional support on international college athletes is scarce (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019). Given Hatteberg (2020) posited mechanisms for social support are most effectively fostered by institutional structures within the setting of collegiate athletics, institutional support in the form of targeted personnel and strategic initiatives has been argued as increasingly vital to the international college athlete experience (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019). In addition, such institutional support contributes significantly to performance—both academic and athletic—and may contribute to perceptions of satisfaction among international college athletes (Trendafilova et al., 2010). However, although scholarship has focused on quantitative metrics to evaluate international college athletes' perceptions of institutional support (Trendafilova et al., 2010), there remains a dearth of literature exploring international college athletes' perceptions of institutional support mechanisms.

Accordingly, the present study sought to examine the experiential satisfaction of international athletes competing at Division I member institutions with a specific focus on the impact of institutional and organizational support. In addition to exploring institutional support mechanisms, the researchers sought to explore the outcomes resulting from the experience of international college athletes competing at Division I member institutions regarding the recommendation of NCAA participation for future international athletes. As such, the primary component of this study was to explore experiential satisfaction with institutional support, and the secondary component sought to explore the outcomes of satisfaction in the context of recommending that future international athletes consider competing in NCAA athletics in the US. The following research questions were formulated to assist in the creation of the qualitative methodological approach guiding this study:

1. To what extent do international athletes feel supported by their respective institutions and communities?
2. To what extent do the lived experiences of international athletes affect their willingness to recommend NCAA athletics competition to aspiring international athletes?

Methodological Approach

The present study sought to explore the perceptions of international athletes competing at NCAA Division I member institutions. Of specific note to the context of the study, researchers were interested in identifying the importance of word-of-mouth connections to international college athletes' enrollment, matriculation, and satisfaction. To identify participants on a national scale, researchers employed a combination of purposeful, convenience, and systematic snowball sampling methods. Although not a preferred sampling method, snowball sampling is accepted as a means to reach "hard-to-reach" populations (TenHouten, 2017). Given the insulated nature of collegiate athletics and athletic departments' traditional unwillingness to make select classifications of athletes (e.g., international athletes) available for questioning (Corr et al., 2024; Sabin et al., 2023), a combination of purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling was deemed appropriate to feasibly conduct the present study. In addition, snowball sampling has been routinely used in scholarship examining the population of college athletes, accounting for the importance of researcher credibility within this unique population specifically (Corr et al., 2023). Accordingly, the researchers contacted four current international college athletes within our personal networks to inquire if they would be willing to participate in this study. At the conclusion of each interview, we asked these initial participants if they were willing to provide contact information for other international athletes currently competing in NCAA Division I athletics. Through initial personal communication with four athletes, we identified a sample of 29 additional international college athletes. These 33 international athletes competed at 12 unique Division I institutions comprise the participants of this study.

Data Collection

Interviews were semi-structured in formulation, allowing researchers to gather unique responses related to international college athletes' perceptions of initial enrollment, matriculation, and satisfaction (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019). Of specific note to the context of the study, the researchers were interested in identifying the importance of word-of-mouth connections to international athletes' enrollment, matriculation, and satisfaction. Interviews were conducted virtually, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity. Interviews ranged between 24 and 50 minutes in length, averaging 36 minutes across the entirety of the sample. Utilizing in-vivo coding, direct quotes were thematically grouped accordingly to the research questions (Manning, 2017). Three members of the research team performed this axial coding process on an individual basis across each interview. As such, intercoder reliability was established through the routine comparison of notes among the researchers throughout the coding process (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The researchers concluded the coding process by performing systematic coding as a group to ensure consistency and reliability of the participants responses.

Findings and Discussion

Thirty-three ($n = 33$) international athletes competing at 12 Division I institutions during the 2022–2023 academic year agreed to participate in this study. Eight of the participants competed in men's sports and 25 in women's sports. Participants represented native countries located in Europe¹ ($n = 21$), North America² ($n = 8$), South America³ ($n = 3$), and the country of South Africa in Africa ($n = 1$). Of note, each of the participants competes in an Olympic sport with track and field ($n = 12$), tennis ($n = 9$),

and soccer ($n = 8$) comprising the greatest representation in the sample.

Institutional and Organizational Support

Institutional Differentiation

Responses pertaining to institutional and organizational support varied widely among participants with no clear emergent pattern among sport-type or native country, indicating that unique institutional settings and stakeholders (e.g., coaches, athletes, staff) most likely play a significant role in determining perceptions of institutional and organizational support. Accordingly, responses are less indicative of international athletes' perceptions of the support provided by the NCAA but rather individual member institutions themselves. Mackenzie, a tennis player from Russia, indicated that although her coaches were supportive, the institution itself "did not provide any programming to help [international athletes]." John, a track and field athlete from Greece, stated similarly that he felt support from coaches but not the institution, "I have won my conference four times and still haven't been [recognized] anywhere around the university. The school focuses more on the football and basketball teams." Responses regarding institutional and organizational support indicate that while important to the overall experience and satisfaction of international athletes, support differs so drastically between universities that making inferences proves to be difficult.

Participants did indicate that institutional support mechanisms were seemingly directed to specific sports and, therefore, a distinct group of athletes. Given international athletes traditionally compete in Olympic sports, the lack of perceived institutional and organizational support is more likely indicative of conventional sport fandom in the US predominantly fixated on NCAA sponsored profit-sports (e.g., football, basketball). However, as international collegiate athletes tend to compete in Olympic sports, such traditional patterns of fandom in the US served to negatively impact participants' perceptions of institutional and organizational support but may not be distinct to the perceptions of domestic athletes competing in Olympic sports as well.

Value of Cultural Familiarity

Overall, participants indicated they were aware of the number of international athletes at the institution prior to their commitment and enrollment. Nearly all stated that currently enrolled international athletes played a significant factor in their decision to attend. Of even greater impact were currently enrolled athletes from the same nationality. Tyler, a track and field athlete from Slovakia, spoke with NCAA athletes from Slovakia frequently during his recruitment and stated, "they are the only reason I came to the United States." Upon enrollment, Tyler noted the continued support he received from international teammates, "European teammates, mainly from mid-Europe, were the only ones I could rely on." Madison, a track and field athlete from the Czech Republic, said the presence of other athletes from her native country made her feel comfortable regarding her ability to adjust and live in the US. Alyssa shared a similar sentiment, "It did impact my decision. There were other people from my home country and that made me feel more comfortable and at home." Sophie, a soccer player from Canada, also stated that familiarity with international athletes was important but it didn't necessarily impact her decision on where she enrolled:

One of my good friends with whom I had played soccer with since I was 15 years old was on the team...although it did not impact my decision...having a sense of home and someone to relate to

Participants represented European countries: Czech Republic (4), Slovakia (4), Norway (2), Russia (2), Spain (2), Belgium (1), Germany (1), Greece (1), Iceland (1), Romania (1), Sweden (1), and Switzerland (1).

Participants represented North American countries: Canada (7) and Mexico (1).

Participants represented South American countries: Argentina (2) and Trinidad & Tobago (1).

was super important.

For international college athletes from countries in relative geographic proximity to the United States (e.g., Canada, Mexico), such sentiment regarding the impact of international athlete representation is perhaps unsurprising given increased cultural familiarity with the US. However, and as indicated by Sophie, the relatability fostered among international teammates was stated to be important during her recruitment and, subsequently, enrollment decision.

Such commentary was common throughout interviews and illustrates the value of cultural familiarity to the ability to effectively recruit and the successful transition of international athletes. In addition, the prevalence and importance of referrals and recommendations among current NCAA athletes is consistent with extant literature identifying word-of-mouth as a significant factor influencing international student enrollment in the US (Bale, 1987, 1991). However, responses such as Sophie's perhaps indicate the prominence of international recruiting among NCAA members and that, although an international social network is no doubt influential within the recruiting process, the normalization of international recruiting has established information streams that may mitigate the importance of word-of-mouth connections (Popp et al., 2011).

Endorsement Outcomes Based on NCAA Experience

Experiential Dissatisfaction and Perceived Deception

Although many participants discussed the sacrifices inherent to international athletes matriculating to the US, some cautioned future international athletes to consider the various risks of NCAA competition. Denise, a volleyball player from Norway, indicated that such risks began in the recruiting process: "Coaches trick international students into schools and programs that are not even remotely close to what they advertised...[coaches] guilt international student into a lot of things because of the money spent on us as international athletes." Jeremy, a soccer player from Mexico, stated similarly, "Certain coaches' prey on players that have just been cut from the academies of European teams and then promise them an amazing time...when they actually come it's a reality check." Jeremy went on to describe an example in which a teammate originally from Europe had been recruited to a university in upstate New York. Having never been to the US, this athlete did not distinguish between New York state and New York City, a fact that coaches reportedly utilized to their advantage in the recruiting process stating that the university was located just outside of New York City. Although relatively accurate, the university was in fact more than 3 hours driving distance from New York City itself, something the athlete only learned upon migration and enrollment. A number of participants also discussed misinformation regarding athletic grant-in-aid (GIA). Latosha, a track and field athlete from Slovakia, discussed getting "tricked" by coaches during her recruitment with regards to the amount covered by her GIA. Unaware of the differentiation between equivalency and head-count scholarships under NCAA policy, many participants echoed similar sentiment to Latosha in which they migrated and enrolled in college only to have inadequate funds to cover basic needs (e.g., housing, food, transportation), tuition, and taxes levied on their GIA.

Inherent Sacrifice and Vulnerability

Although the description of coaches' actions as predatory during the recruitment of international athletes is disputable and not ubiquitous, responses such as those by Denise and Jeremy do indicate the

inherent susceptibility of international athletes within the recruiting process. Whereas unfilled promises in the recruitment of prospective college athletes—both international and domestic—are not uncommon, international athletes are increasingly susceptible to such rhetoric. Indicative of the 18 participants that stated college enrollment was their first time visiting the US, a litany of factors (e.g., economic, geographic) contribute to international athletes' inability to visit prospective college campuses prior to enrollment. Denise crystalized the risks and sacrifices that international athletes assume when matriculating to the US:

[You sacrifice] so much to move to the United States, and if [you're] not happy or successful? [You] can lose it all...I think there is [sic] a lot of untold stories and trauma happening in the NCAA that is not discussed. So many people leave because of these terrible conditions.

Similarly, Christina, a volleyball player from Canada, emphasized the control that coaches occupy in shaping the overall experience of an international athlete. Alluding to the increased financial commitment institutions make to international athletes compared to athlete from the US, Christina noted the power coaches wield over international athletes specifically: "Imagine your job being consistently every day threatened if whether [sic] you deserve your scholarship...my coach threatens to take my scholarship after one bad game. And now I have to focus on school...to make contributions to team GPA [grade-point-average]."

Although such experiences may be similar among domestic athletes competing in NCAA sponsored Olympic sports, many international athlete participants in this study indicated they believed coaches strategically took advantage of their limited knowledge and understanding of the distinct college athletics system in the US.

Regarding experiential dissatisfaction and inherent vulnerability, an apparent theme indicated by numerous participants was their perceived commodification. Participants' responses illustrate coaches may take advantage of international athletes' lack of awareness or understanding of the college athletic system distinct to the US. Other participants indicated a perceived increased responsibility for team success fostered by coaches. Although further research examining coaches recruiting actions when misrepresenting the value of an athletic GIA or repeatedly emphasizing the increased effort and cost associated with recruiting international athletes is necessary to determine deviancy, multiple participants in this study believed some coaches take advantage of international athletes' lack of awareness of the collegiate athletic system in the US for the performance benefits provided by international athletes in Olympic sports specifically. Among these participants' responses, the commodification of international athletes occurred when they perceived their value to the athletic program primarily in economic terms (e.g., cost expended to recruit, importance to team success). Accordingly, the manner in which coaches communicate the tangible financial investment expended to successfully recruit prospective international athletes may affect their perceived increased responsibility for team success. Perhaps indicative of the drastic changes impacting the collegiate athletics marketplace (e.g., name, image, and likeness [NIL], conference realignment), the college athlete experience may be becoming more transactional in nature, diluting international athletes' perceptions as to the value of NCAA participation.

Willingness to Endorse NCAA Athletics Participation

Correspondingly, responses varied relative to participants willingness to recommend NCAA participation to future international athletes. Much of these responses were dependent on participants experi-

ences as current NCAA athletes and corresponding levels of satisfaction. Participants depicting negative experiences expressed reluctance to encourage NCAA participation among future international athletes. Similar to perceptions of institutional and organizational support, much of the responses regarding satisfaction with NCAA experience were contextualized to specific institutions and/or institutional members (e.g., coaches, teammates, administrators). Recognizing the importance of word-of-mouth connections during the recruiting process of participants in this study, such reluctance to share positive experiences with international athletes is striking. Given the importance and value of international athletes to overall athletic department performance, athletic administrators should take note of such findings and evaluate the support currently provided to international athletes enrolled at their respective institutions.

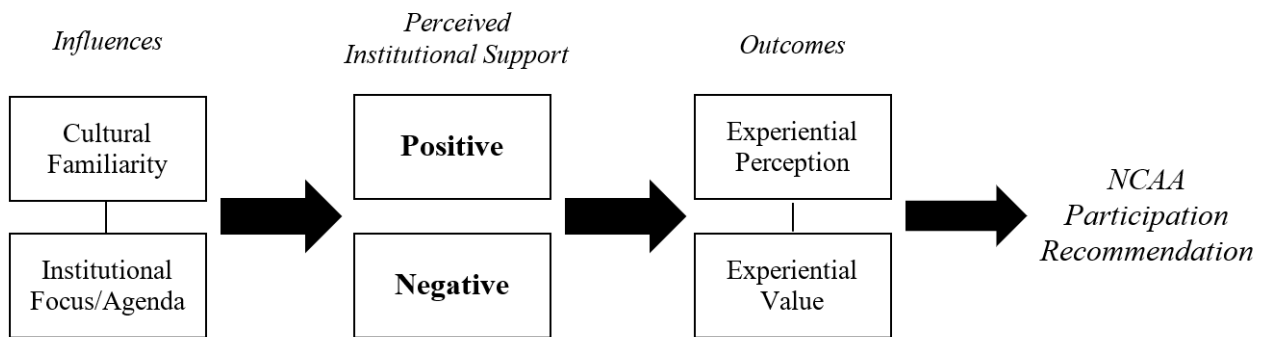
Implications and Conclusion

Although perceived ease of socialization varied widely among participants in this study, many international athletes expressed dissatisfaction with their college athletic experience, a novel finding compared to extant literature (Beattie & Turner, 2020; Trendafilova et al., 2010). Accordingly, this dissatisfaction resonated in a reluctance to recommend enrollment in U.S. higher education and competition in NCAA athletics to international athletes considering collegiate athletic opportunities at NCAA institutions, a novel finding within the spectrum of research on the international college athlete experience. Given that word-of-mouth serves as an influential determinant to international enrollment in U.S. higher education (Bale, 1987, 1991), negative experiences adversely affect NCAA institutions and institutional members (e.g., administrators, coaches) ability to recruit international athletes. In fact, participants universally stated word-of-mouth occupied a significant position influencing their decision to partake in NCAA athletics. However, participants also stated they were reluctant to recommend NCAA athletics participation to other international athletes.

Participants in this study primarily indicated their personal experiences led to such reluctance even though numerous factors alluded to such reluctance to recommend NCAA athletics participation to international athletes. The most influential components contributing to international athlete participants' experiential dissatisfaction were perceived institutional support and intra-team dynamics. Given the positional status of Olympic sports within the context of college athletics fandom as well as the impact of intra-team dynamics on the experiential satisfaction of domestic college athletes (Beattie & Turner, 2022; Jin et al., 2022), the experiential dissatisfaction of international athlete participants in this study may not be entirely distinct from those of domestic athletes. However, the combination of these factors in tandem with the inherent adjustments impacting the international athlete experience (e.g., cultural transition, language barrier) contribute to international athletes' unique experiences, and the experiential dissatisfaction of many international athlete participants in this study (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Antecedents and Outcomes of Perceived Institutional Support Among International College Athletes



Internationally, many countries have increased efforts to retain their most intelligent students and motivate matriculation through a national college or university (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). Many participants in this study indicated that if other opportunities similar to those provided by the NCAA existed internationally, they would not have enrolled in the US. Although such indication illustrates the value of NCAA competition in securing international student enrollment at institutions in the US, alterations to legislation (e.g., NIL, employee status), vaccination requirements, and the changing landscape of NCAA athletics are potentially significant changes that may affect the experience of international athletes (Solomon et al., 2022). As 64% of participants in this study are from Europe, the negative experiences and sole motivating factor of NCAA competition determining enrollment in the US may serve to the benefit of European college and universities seeking to retain students and increase enrollment within the continent.

Based off the findings of this exploratory study, the changing structure of the NCAA, and increased international efforts to retain talented students, we posit that athletic administrators and coaches need to evaluate the current procedural components available to international athletes at their respective institutions. At institutions with large international athlete representation, specific staff members or standing committees designated to the consistent monitoring of international athletes and their experiences in the US may provide a support system that many athletes in this study stated was lacking from an institutional standpoint. Given the impact of word-of-mouth and the stated value of international representation in international college athlete recruitment, directed mentorship programming or institutional efforts to facilitate mentorship opportunities between current and former international college athletes and incoming international college athletes could be of unique value to the transitional experience of international college athletes. In addition, such guidance would provide a facilitated social network able to progress beyond an initial transitional experience and be of value in ensuring experiential satisfaction throughout the collegiate athletics experience. In addition, comments from participants regarding lack of perceived institutional support could also be mitigated by institutional athletic department members (e.g., administrators, staff) physical attendance at sporting events in which international athletes are competing and increased attention on behalf of athletic department marketing and communications staff to adequately support and cover, primarily, Olympic sports. Such efforts are relatively simple to facilitate and, based off the findings of this study, seem to be extremely effective mechanisms in which to positively impact the

experiential satisfaction of international college athletes.

Limitations

Although qualitative research seeks to examine the unique experiences of a subset of individuals and does not produce generalizable data, the researchers attempted to capture a sample of participants representative of various competitive NCAA classifications and sport-types. However, an acknowledged limitation to this study is the implementation of convenience and snowball sampling, respectively. Although the researchers justify the implementation of such sampling methods among the population of college athletes above, it is still important to note that such sampling methods limit the breadth of the subsequent findings and overall discussion. For instance, nearly 90% of participants in this study competed in one of three sports: track and field, tennis, or soccer. Undoubtedly, and according to NCAA (2023) data, international athletes compete in numerous sport offerings other than these three sports, specifically. Such phenomenon, however, was not consistent when sampling athletes by native country. Although the researchers believed native country would severely impact the geographic makeup of participants attained through snowball sampling, participants were not inclined to provide the contact information for potential participants solely from their native country, or even continent. Such findings speak to the diversity of the international athlete—as well as the domestic athlete—network competing college athletes develop while competing in NCAA athletics. Although the researchers acknowledge the stated limitations of this study, a concerted effort was taken to ensure the sample of participants was as diverse as possible.

Future Research

Participants experiential dissatisfaction with NCAA athletics and subsequent reluctance to recommend NCAA athletics participation to international athletes lends itself to future examinations of the international athlete experience in NCAA athletics. As international athletes are sought after for athletic performance benefits as well as efforts to foster institutional cultural diversity (Guo & Jamal, 2007), the dissatisfaction expressed by participants in this study is both striking when compared to extant literature and concerning. Although this study conceptualizes the value of the international athlete experience within the context of institutional athletic department performance and financial success, future research conducting more in-depth analysis with larger sample sizes would be valuable in establishing the validity to such conceptualizations as well as deepening our understanding of the experiential satisfaction of international athletes competing in NCAA athletics. In addition, the continued evolution of the NCAA from both a structural and policy standpoint provides an opportunity for more comprehensive examinations of the impact of an evolving collegiate athletics marketplace on participating athletes themselves. Given the status of international college athletes within a uniquely American institutional setting (re: NCAA athletics), we join extant scholars (e.g., see Jolly et al., 2024; Jolly et al., 2022; Pericak et al., 2024; and Sethi et al., 2022, for a complete review) in advocating for additional research on the experiential complexities and perceptions of international college athletes within the everchanging NCAA marketplace.

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