

# Welcome to America!

## How can athletic departments better assist international student-athletes with their transition into the American university setting?

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**Abstract:** The current study examined how athletic stakeholders (e.g., coaches and support staff) at a NCAA Division I mid-major university attempt to assist international student-athletes (ISAs) with their transition into the American university setting. Semi-structured interviews with 10 athletic administrators and coaches discussed common transition issues ISAs typically encounter (e.g., cultural changes, dietary/nutritional adjustments, financial misunderstandings, homesickness, etc.), as well as resources (e.g., consistent on-boarding checklists) and a training (e.g., cultural competency training) that should be provided to practitioners that assist/coach ISAs. Additionally, programmatic offerings that might provide support systems and improve the student-athlete experience for ISAs were discussed. Our findings highlight the considerations that athletic administrators and coaches should know when attempting to support ISAs during the beginning stages of their transition to America. Due to the growing number of ISAs competing in college sport, understanding how best to support this population is crucial for athletic departments that are hoping to attract and retain ISAs.

**Keywords:** College sport, International student-athletes, Cultural competency

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, strategies, and training athletics personnel (e.g., administrators and coaches) received at a mid-major university to prepare them to assist international student-athletes (ISAs) with their transition into the American university setting. DeHass (2009) reported that the number of ISAs participating in college sport almost doubled from 2002 to 2008. Per a more recent National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Research report, the number of ISAs at the Division I and Division II levels increased almost 37 percent from 2013 to 2018 (NCAA Research, 2019), with seven Division I sports in which ISAs accounted for more than 25% of the total student-athletes [i.e., men's tennis (63%), women's tennis (62%), women's ice hockey (42%), men's ice hockey (36%), men's soccer (34%), women's golf (31%), and women's field hockey (30%)]. There were three Division II sports in which ISAs accounted for more than 25% of the total student-athletes [see men's tennis (58%), women's tennis (38%), and men's soccer (26%)]. Of note, several sports experienced significant increases in their ISA populations during that time. For example, ISA representation in men's basketball increased by almost 27 percent across both Division I and Division II, with almost 35 percent at the Division I level-only (NCAA Research, 2019).

The decision by ISAs to continue their athletic careers in an American college/university environment while also pursuing a degree is not a recent trend (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000), nor it is uncommon. The NCAA's Office of Inclusion reports there are more than 17,000 ISAs studying and competing at NCAA member institutions (NCAA, n.d.). Ridinger and Pastore (2000) noted that the first wave of ISAs came from Canada to run track-and-field during the 1900s. However, since the 1950s there has been an increase in attention towards ISAs during the recruiting process from a wide variety of collegiate athletic programs (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001; Stidwill, 1984). In light of the historic growth and continued increases in the number of ISAs participating in college sport, an examination such as this one is important and timely for athletic administrators and coaches as they are assisting and/or recruiting a large number of ISAs.

Considering the emergence and growth of this student-athlete population, learning about the challenges ISAs' encounter during their transition into the American university setting, and the ways in which athletic stakeholders might become more informed members of an ISA's support system, may help institutions recruit and/or retain ISAs. Additionally, due to the lengthy recruitment process ISAs have to undergo, understanding how athletic stakeholders and coaches could better assist ISAs may help facilitate this process for both parties. Considering their dual status as both 'international students' and 'student-athletes', athletic stakeholders should be cognizant of how transitioning to the U.S. may impact an ISA's well-being. International students often experience

anxiety, culture shock, depression, social isolation, and stress (Mori, 2000; Sandhu, 1995). Unfortunately, Redden (2019) shared that the majority of international students may be reluctant to seek mental health counseling due to the "stigmatization of mental illness in their home countries and common (incorrect) myths that seeking treatment could result in a notation on their transcript or the revocation of their visa" (para. 1). Thus, having a strong support system within their athletic department is key. Jara-Pazmino et al. (2017) argued that coaches can help ISAs cope with their mental health issues by maintaining constant one-on-one communication with their ISAs focused on well-being, and assigning an assistant coach to an ISA as a mentor. Understanding why ISAs might need mental health/wellbeing care is just as important as caring about them.

Nonetheless, due to the emergence of ISAs as a large sub-population within collegiate athletic programs, athletic departments need to adapt to new trends and recognize where they can best accommodate their ISAs. The results of our interviews with 10 athletic administrators and coaches highlighted common transition issues encountered by ISAs, a desire for more ISA-related onboarding resources, and suggestions for developing ISA support systems.

## **Literature Review**

Although all international students may experience similar difficulties during their transition to the United States, Rodriguez (2014) opined that ISAs "face additional stressors related to maintaining a scholarship and on-court / on-field performance, as well as team dynamics and their relationship with their coach or coaching staff" (p. 39). ISAs face additional unique challenges, including acclimatization, adjusting to a new sports culture, isolation, language barriers, navigating immigration, and travel (Pierce et al., 2011). In their survey of almost 200 ISAs, Pierce et al. found that adapting to U.S. culture and homesickness were the most difficult aspects of the university experience, while the most important elements were a strong support system from teammates and coaches. To ease the stress associated with moving to a new country, Berry (2005) recommends that members of a support system make changes co-occurring – meaning that the ISA and the host culture both change together as information is shared.

Even though a large portion of ISAs come from English speaking countries (e.g., Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), they are still likely to experience challenges similar to those faced by ISAs from non-English speaking countries. Anecdotally, practitioners should understand that homesickness is such a difficult challenge for ISAs because they are likely to come to the United States without any family members, and usually do not have any connections within their chosen university besides fellow teammates and coaches. Therefore, understanding where ISAs are coming from can help athletic stakeholders be better prepared to welcome ISAs

and connect them to other ISAs or possibly with others from their home country. At the Division I level, a large portion of the 2018 first-year ISAs came from English speaking countries, as Canada and the United Kingdom led the list with 737 and 285 respectively; Australia and New Zealand appeared fourth and seventh, respectively, with 167 and 87 (NCAA Research, 2019). However, several non-English speaking countries also appeared within the top ten, including Germany, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, France, and Italy (NCAA Research, 2019). Of note, soccer, tennis, basketball, and track & field have the highest amount of ISAs among Division I men's sports, while tennis, soccer, track & field, and swimming have the highest number of ISAs among Division I women's sports (NCAA Research, 2019).

When it comes to Division II, the top ten nations of origin for first-year ISAs are similar to the Division I level; however, as of 2018, Brazil (#6) and Norway (#9) joined the top ten (NCAA Research, 2019). Among Division II men's sports, soccer, tennis, golf, and basketball appear to attract the greatest number of ISAs, while tennis, soccer, track, and cross country lead the board within Division II women's sports. Therefore, coaches within those sports should be prepared to work with ISAs, as they will likely encounter and/or connect with them during the recruitment process due to the larger supply of ISAs within those sports. Additionally, between Division I and II, every sport experienced an increase in the number of incoming ISAs between 2013 and 2018, except for women's bowling, gymnastics, and women's ice hockey (at the Division I level), baseball, men's ice hockey, wrestling (at the Division II level), and women's lacrosse and women's water polo (at the Division II level).

### ***Research on ISAs***

Previous research on ISAs has looked at their academic and athletic satisfaction (e.g., Trendafilova et al., 2010), differences between international and domestic student-athlete populations (Popp et al., 2009), motivations for participating in college sport (Stokowski et al., 2013), adjustment to college life relative to their domestic student-athlete counterparts (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000), and academic advising recommendations (Newell, 2015). In one of the earliest ISA studies, Ridinger and Pastore (2000) sought to determine how well ISAs adjusted to college relative to their domestic teammates and the general student body. They utilized Baker and Siryk's (1989) student adaptation to college questionnaire (SACQ) to survey the general student body (both in-state and out-of-state), domestic student-athletes (both in-state and out-of-state), and international students (athlete and non-athlete). They found that ISAs were better adjusted to college in comparison to their non-athlete international counterparts. Furthermore, results showed that ISAs adjust to college as well as students and student-athletes from the United States.

To determine if domestic student-athlete and ISA views on the purpose of collegiate sport differed, Popp et al. (2009) compared the survey responses of almost 175 ISAs against those of 100+ domestic student-athletes on a modified version of Duda's (1989) purpose of sport questionnaire (PSQ). Of the seven factors assessed in Duda's questionnaire (e.g. competitiveness, good citizen, high status, mastery and cooperation, physically active, self-esteem, and social status), only the 'competitiveness' factor was statistically significantly different between the two groups; domestic student-athletes rated that factor higher than ISAs. The most important factors for ISAs were 'self-esteem' and 'mastery and cooperation,' whereas the least important were 'social status' and 'competitiveness.' Looking past the purpose of sport and instead examining satisfaction, Trendafilova et al. (2010) used the athlete satisfaction questionnaire (ASQ; Riemer & Chelladurai, 1998) to measure ISA satisfaction as it relates to "aspects of athletic participation such as performance (both team and individual), leadership, the team, the organization and the individual" (p. 354). They surveyed 200+ ISAs and learned respondents were satisfied with their academic support service offerings, personal treatment, team social contribution, and medical support. Additionally, male ISAs were more satisfied with external agents (i.e., media, the local and university community) than female ISAs. Thus, Trendafilova et al. concluded that ISAs were "satisfied with their overall academic and athletic experience at NCAA Division I-FBS institutions" (p. 359).

Stokowski et al. (2013) compared the sport participation motivations of ISAs to those of domestic student-athletes. They had 475+ student-athletes, both domestic and international, complete the sport motivation scale (SMS; Pelletier et al., 1995). The SMS "consists of seven subscales that measure three types of Intrinsic Motivation..., three forms of regulation for Extrinsic Motivation..., and Amotivation" (Pelletier et al., 1995). Their results revealed ISAs were more intrinsically motivated, as opposed to extrinsically motivated; amotivation produced the lowest source of motivation for ISAs. Of the seven SMS subscales, introjected regulation was the only one in which ISAs and domestic student-athletes significantly differed; ISAs reported a larger score. Stated another way, their statistically significant finding suggested that ISAs "participate in sport out of obligation, guilt, or compensation more so than their domestic counterparts" (Stokowski et al., 2013, p. 143).

Lastly, Newell's (2015) meta-analysis of the ISA literature identified eight adjustment issues that athletics support staff and coaches should be aware of, these included: homesickness, adjusting to U.S. culture, language barriers, adjusting to competing demands, coping with on-field success or failure, socialization, dealing with the end of the athletic career, and adjusting to U.S. education. She remarked, "...to better individualize advising and mentoring provided to the ISA, practitioners must understand the factors that influence the transition of ISAs into college life" (p. 43). Despite calls, like Newell's, around the need for practitioners to better understand 'the factors that influence the transition of ISAs into college life', there is a "paucity of cultural sport psychology literature"

(Duchesne et al., 2011, p. 63) examining how athletic administrators and coaches have developed strategies to assist and support ISAs as they transition into the American university setting. One strategy for preparing athletic administrators and coaches to work with ISAs involves requiring them to receive cultural competency training (CCT), as this would provide athletic stakeholders with an opportunity to improve their awareness and understanding of multicultural issues. In addition, this training would also assist them in working with other diverse populations (e.g., ethnic minorities, racial minorities, sexual minorities).

### *Cultural Competency Training*

One way in which athletic departments might best assist ISAs is by becoming more culturally competent. Cultural competence is about one's actions and will to better understand different people, to be open and respectful of new cultural perspectives, and to work to provide equal opportunities for all (Livingstone, 2014). A recent article by Cooper et al. (2017) argued that there is a lack of cultural competency training (CCT) among athletic stakeholders in the NCAA college sports system because most of those individuals are not required to complete training and/or obtain certifications to practice their jobs. Cooper et al. suggested that CCT be required for every stakeholder in an athletic department in order to overcome cultural biases and learn more about their student-athletes with unique and diverse cultural backgrounds. The authors recommend that CCT include Lynch's (2011) three dimensions: a) trainees are encouraged to explore their own culture and engage in reflection; b) trainees must learn about other cultures while acknowledging their own lack of awareness/ misconceptions; and c) trainees should learn about their students' cultures, investigate, and learn to appreciate their traditions in order to be supportive in a culturally responsive fashion. Cooper et al.'s call-to-action was motivated by race-consciousness, but it can easily be extrapolated to include understanding ISAs.

Additionally, since a main goal of collegiate athletic departments is to achieve excellence, both in the classroom as well as in sport competitions, it is crucial that athletic personnel are prepared to help diverse student-athletes transition into the university setting. For some of the same reasons athletic administrators and coaches are required to complete mandatory Title IX and Protection of Minors training, the addition of CCT will help trainees recognize discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards, and transition challenges encountered by, minorities that would have been ignored due to the lack of knowledge about others' culture. To that matter, studies have found that CCT helps professionals identify and understand cultural barriers, as well as find strategies to overcome such barriers in both the short and long term (Deen et al., 2014). To become culturally competent, it is necessary that athletic stakeholders have a satisfactory level of CCT, as failure to discuss cultural differences with ISAs and other student-athletes might lead to miscommunication, underachievement, and dissatisfaction from both parties

(Mori et al., 2009). Therefore, CCT training can lead to increased satisfaction for all involved (Mori et al., 2009), enhance athletic performance of minorities (Harris et al., 2014), and improve overall experience (Sue, 2006).

Although CCT can have positive outcomes, it still faces several noteworthy criticisms that athletic departments should account for. For instance, "there is no accepted conceptual framework for organizing the construct's multifaceted components. Even common definitions of cultural competency are difficult to operationalize, that is, put into terms that can be linked to identifiable, observable, or measurable behaviors or actions" (Geron, 2002, p. 41). Additionally, in some cases, CCT education promotes cultural generalizations and reinforces stereotypes (Malat, 2013). Modifying Tsai (2016)'s critique of CCT in health care, trainings that reduce entire groups of people into a homogenous unit pave the way for even well-intentioned trainees to remain ignorant. Such trainings spoil the good intent to create better ISA outcomes by legitimizing the validity of stereotypes and the development of athletic stakeholder biases. Lastly, trainings may not be comprehensive enough to account for understanding the "social, political, and economic discriminatory practices which impacts diverse athletes identity, and personal and athletic development in sport settings" (Burden & Lambie, 2011, pp. 10-11). ISAs bring many identities with them when they come to the U.S., so it is important that CCT prepare athletic stakeholders to work with those identities.

## **Method**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences, strategies, and training that athletic administrators and coaches at a mid-major institution received to prepare them to assist ISAs with their transition into the American university setting. To accomplish this exploration, an interview guide was developed to stimulate conversation around past and current experiences coaching/working with ISAs, participant observations of the transition issues ISAs encounter, creation/development of support systems for ISAs, and suggestions for creating positive social change.

## ***Data Collection***

The research team used a purposive sampling method to identify athletic administrators and coaches at a mid-major institution that often assisted or coached ISAs. In total, 40 individuals were emailed and asked to participate in this study. The recruitment email noted that interviews would be conducted over the phone and audio-recorded for transcription purposes. In total, 10 ( $N = 10$ ) athletic administrators and coaches agreed to participate in this study (see Table 1). The participant pool was diverse in regards to positions held and job responsibilities, as it included four ( $n = 4$ ) athletic administrators and six ( $n = 6$ ) coaches. The coaches were involved with the sports of basketball, field hockey, soccer, and tennis. In terms of demographics, all of the participants were White and

born in the United States. The gender breakdown was fairly split, with six ( $n = 6$ ) females and four ( $n = 4$ ) males. Six participants ( $n = 6$ ) had 10+ years of experience working with ISAs. Participants were promised confidentiality and were given an opportunity at the beginning of their interview to pick a pseudonym that would be associated with their responses. A semi-structured interview guide was created and then revised after consultation with other academics that were members of a diversity-related scholarship program at the research team's institution. Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes in length.

**Table 1 Participant Information**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Title</i>
Bill	Athletic Administration
Fred	Marketing
Kaleigh	Assistant Coach
Lee	Head Coach
Mary	Assistant Coach
Megan	Assistant Coach
Micah	Assistant Athletics Director
Paul	Head Coach
Ross	Compliance
Sierra	Head Coach

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis program, so research team members could read each transcript, generate codes, and analyze the data. Data were analyzed according to Patton's (2015) strategy for qualitative data analysis, which involves: transcription, data organization, content analysis, initial coding, inductive analysis, and development of themes. Data were coded inductively to allow themes to emerge. In total, 35 ( $N = 35$ ) open codes were created. Examples of open codes included "Checklists for athletic stakeholders," "Homesick," "Importance of diversity and inclusion," "Language barriers," and "Welcoming environment." Open codes were grouped based on similarities: a process that returned four ( $N = 4$ ) broad categories or themes. Members of the research team utilized peer debriefing and continuously endeavored to provide rich descriptions to support the trustworthiness of their research findings (Thomas et al., 2011).

### **Results**

Four themes emerged from our interviews with athletic administrators and coaches around the experiences, strategies, and training they have received to prepare them to assist ISAs with their transition into the American university setting. These themes included: 1) Common transition issues encountered by ISAs; 2) Communication



and understanding can be problematic; 3) Desire for ISA-related onboarding resources; and 4) Suggestions for developing ISA support systems.

### ***Theme 1: Common transition issues encountered by ISAs***

This theme included conversations around the financial misunderstandings some ISAs have regarding their athletic scholarships, struggles with homesickness, adjustment to eating American food, the need for patience during the transition process, and some initial obstacles (e.g., academic, cultural, and social changes) that athletic administrators and coaches should consider when interacting with ISAs.

In terms of financial misunderstandings, Paul noted that, "There's a lot of costs that they have to – even though they're on a full scholarship – account for the monies that they need to be over here." This can be troubling because, as Kaleigh stated, "The agencies that they go through have people that tell them, 'Hey, you're going to have a full-ride and you shouldn't have to pay for anything.'" However, some costs they still might have include insurance and taxes back to their home and U.S. governments. Another commonly discussed transition issue was homesickness. Bill said, "There's always the homesick element. It's one thing to be three hours from home and be homesick. It's another element to be across the world and be homesick." Fred, Lee, and Ross also commented on homesickness during their interviews. Of note, Paul said his ISAs are rarely homesick due to their "matur[ity] about being away from home." CCT might provide athletic administrators and coaches with knowledge of ways in which they might make their ISAs feel more at home. Celebrating holidays, reading up on new events, and preparing meals from the ISA's home nation show an authentic desire to be multicultural and support one's ISAs.

Interestingly, almost all interviewees mentioned conversations they have had with ISAs about food. Sierra shared that her ISAs have "express[ed] missing certain meals or foods that are not available here." Paul noted that ISAs may "have a hard time finding comfort food." When discussing nutrition, Ross shared that, "We might not have all the same food options that they were used to before." Bill has heard complaints from ISAs about American food in which they have said, "This food is not what I'm used to eating. American food is disgusting. It's greasy. It makes me fat." It is important to remember that greasy/unhealthy food consumption negatively influences athletic performance. Several participants stressed the need for being patient with ISAs during the transition process. Lee, when comparing incoming ISAs to domestic students remarked that, "The international athlete is in a situation where they potentially will need more attention and could have more problems." Language barriers and college coursework expectations were the two biggest areas of concern.

***Theme 2: Communication and understanding can be problematic***

In terms of the difficulties that can come from working with ISAs, Paul believes that the “communication piece can be the biggest challenge and most of that is in the recruiting process.” Paul also shared that “when they’re in the team setting, the players from here talk a lot in slang and they[ISAs] can get lost real quickly in those conversations and the next time you know, they’re not talking at all.” Having noticed that, he said that he and his assistants “work really hard to make sure that our players that are from the States understand if they’re going to talk in slang, they have to explain what that means and help educate them.” Lee echoed the ‘slang’ concerns when he said, “You can study a language and understand it from an academic/book perspective, but picking up on all the slang terms ...can be a communication breakdown in terms of what is said versus what was intended.”

Sierra noted that, when communicating with ISAs, you, “Just have to know to ask questions before you make assumptions about things.” She cautioned that administrators and coaches should continuously ask, “Am I using too many higher-level vocabulary words that you’re[ISAs] not getting the grasp of what I’m saying?” Kaleigh said something similar when recalling how confusion occurs “probably either because we’re talking too fast or she just needs more time to just devise it.” Kaleigh also addressed the challenges coaches encounter when trying to coach both English and non-English student-athletes. She commented, “We have a couple of Spanish kids and I’ve asked the question recently, do we just teach our team five words on the field so that when we’re communicating, you know five words and they know five words?”

Ross remarked that it is also important to consider cultural norms when communicating with ISAs. He stated, “communication norms can be different, even something as small as nonverbal during a face-to-face conversation can be off-putting if you’re not familiar with maybe some of the norms of that individual’s culture or background.” One cultural norm might focus on what is humorous, and how humor is expressed by individuals. Sierra believes that communication issues may impede coaches and domestic players from getting a complete view of an ISA’s personality. She opined that, “we don’t get the full picture of a person’s personality because maybe conversationally, they can’t express humor in the same way or they’re trying to translate things.”

The communication issues extend into classroom settings. Bill requests that teachers play films with subtitles as frequently as possible to allow ISAs to “keep up with the conversation in the class.” According to Bill, “Some professors are better at supporting students in their classroom, but I think that we need to better support students that have English as a second language.” Micah shared a depiction of the ISA experience that really encapsulates their struggles. She said, “English 101 has 60 people in it, that’s probably the biggest classroom they’ve ever been in...if you add English as a second language to that, I think they have a hard time or could have a hard time.”

***Theme 3: Desire for ISA-related onboarding resources***

This theme included conversations around the need for/value of diversity and inclusion training, checklists and/or tools that could be developed to assist athletic administrators and coaches with helping ISAs transition to the American university setting, and clinics, groups, and/or seminars that might promote cultural education and multicultural learning.

Micah's remark about athletics personnel needing more diversity and inclusion training really encapsulated her colleagues' comments. She said, "I think our coaches and our staff can always use more instruction or teaching moments about all that kind of stuff. I would include internationals in diversity and inclusion programming." Requiring this type of training, and promoting its value, would better prepare and resource trainees as they assist and/or coach diverse ISA populations. As Bill opined, "Their[ISAs] cultural norms are different, not bad, just different. So, figuring those out and how best to work with them, just like you do with any other student might be a little different." Finally, as noted by Ross, engaging in diversity and inclusion training helps to ensure that athletic departments are "creating a culture that is conducive to being as helpful and supportive for as many of our student-athletes as possible."

Another resource, aside from training, that might help athletic administrators and coaches prepare to assist ISAs is onboarding checklists. Ross, a compliance professional, said his office developed "an 8-10 page document that lays out, here are the tasks that you [coaches/ISAs] need to have completed prior to enrolling. A-to-Z, these are the things that need to happen before you get to campus." Although the document is supposed to be helpful, several interviewees argued that a checklist might be more useful. Megan thinks it would be helpful "If we could have a centralized checklist of information on admissions criteria." Her colleague, Sierra, opined, "It would just be helpful if we could create more structure around it[ISA onboarding] that we could know every step – like in a shared document or something like that in Box." Additionally, according to Bill, checklists could highlight for athletics personnel the on-campus resources available to ISAs.

***Theme 4: Suggestions for developing ISA support systems***

This theme included discussions about a potential support group where ISAs are introduced to other ISAs and able to bond over a shared experience, areas where current support programs and networks could be improved, acknowledgment and celebration of what is already working, ISA orientation ideas, and new support programming suggestions.

Athletic administrators and coaches often work to connect ISAs with one another. Kaleigh noted that, "We

usually look to reach out to each other and kind of ask, 'Hey, do you have anybody from this country?' Even if we just have similar regions, we'll maybe try to link athletes together." Bill and Micah both discussed how their institution might create a monthly ISA meeting where the athletic department can check-in with their ISAs. Ross believes the athletic department is "very good about just encouraging inclusivity and making sure that we're all doing our part to be the best teammate for each other." Lee said, "I've never really gone outside the university for anything. I really don't feel it's necessary to go outside of what we have in place to take care of our athletes." Of note, Paul cautioned, "The big thing I would say is the conversation of how we do it better can never stop. It's not something that you ever just get solved, because there's always new things."

In terms of improving ISA programming, Fred stated, "... we do a really good job with student-athlete on-boarding and orientation, and *what might help us with that is to actually have an international specific piece of each of those programs*" [emphasis added]. He also shared that it is important to consider new ways to better incorporate ISAs into the local community, as opposed to solely thinking about the campus community. Bill heard that sport psychology graduate students and student-athlete support services professionals might collaborate to facilitate an ISA group. Ross expressed an interest in having "coaches be on a group or a committee...that would work on coming up with programming, drawing from their experiences, that we could do to help support these students as they transition."

## **Discussion and Implications**

The findings of this study inform athletic administrators' and coaches' understanding of the transition issues that ISAs typically encounter when coming to America (Theme 1) and provides college athletics stakeholders with the knowledge that they need to be valuable members of an ISA's support system. Participants highlighted how communication issues may create bonding, coaching, and educational challenges for ISAs (Theme 2). Additionally, our interviewees shared that it would be worthwhile for athletic departments to create an ISA on-boarding checklist (Theme 3) for athletic administrators and coaches to reference when working with ISAs to ensure that their transition goes smoothly. Finally, the suggestions for support programming (Theme 4; e.g., incorporating more international dialogue into student-athlete on-boarding and orientation programs, fostering community engagement, an ISA support group, and a coach-led steering committee for ISA programming) align with a participant's comment that athletic departments should continue having conversations around/devising new ways to accommodate and support ISAs. Rather than becoming complacent with the strategies and systems already in-place, athletic departments should strive to keep improving the ways in which they are attempting to support their ISAs.

The prevalence of ISAs competing in the NCAA clearly indicates that coaches view this population as an important recruiting pool. To that end, athletic administrators and coaches should strive to use these results to improve how their athletic departments recruit, advise, coach, and support the ISAs brought to their campus. These findings, in terms of understanding the transition process, encourage practitioners to account for all financial hardships/obstacles their ISAs might need to know. Recalling a participant's comment, many think their athletic scholarship means they are financially set. Additionally, and in alignment with Pierce et al.'s (2011) findings that ISAs may be homesick and struggle to adjust to U.S. culture, our results reveal that practitioners should check-in with their ISAs to see if homesickness is hindering their student-athlete experience. In alignment with Berry's (2005) view that the experience should be co-occurring, it is important to meaningfully engage ISAs in conversations about home as doing so may potentially make them feel more supported in the U.S. – it also represents a valuable cultural growth opportunities for athletic administrators and coaches. Practitioners should also make sure that their ISAs are eating healthy and have found American alternatives that meet their dietary/nutrition needs. Perhaps efforts could be made to host ISAs for meals that resemble what they are used to, while also providing ISAs with a chance to cook for their host (athletic administrator or coach). As a participant noted, ISAs "potentially will need more attention and could have more problems," so monitoring their experience is important. One way to account for those issues, as well as others that athletic administrators and coaches have dealt with in the past, is to create a shareable checklist that includes information on "What the ISAs need to do" and "What athletic administrators and/or coaches need to look out for."

In addition to having their checklist(s) ready, athletic administrators and coaches need to determine how best to communicate with their ISAs. The recruitment process is just the first area where communication barriers/complications may arise. ISAs may struggle with their transition into an English-speaking culture and education system. Socially, ISAs may struggle in trying to communicate with their teammates and in displaying their authentic selves. Reviewing the top 10 nations that provide ISAs (NCAA Research, 2019), those ISAs that speak Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish are likely to experience a more difficult transition period than those ISAs that come from English-speaking countries. To that end, athletic administrators and coaches should educate their domestic student-athletes, faculty, and others that will interact with incoming ISAs. Educating those groups will create a supportive environment for ISAs as they adjust to a new culture and language. Being open to education and compromise is also important. For example, Kaleigh's "five words" practice presents an opportunity for the ISA to learn English *and* for their support system to learn words from the ISA's home country. It is vitally important that athletic administrators and coaches do not force their ISAs to

undergo acculturation, a process "concerned with minority groups' adaptation of and assimilation to the dominant culture in a nation" (Li et al., 2012, p. 158). Instead, stakeholders should also strive to actively educate themselves about their ISAs' culture. Helping ISAs adjust to American culture is important, but they should not be forced to forget nor be discouraged from sharing their home nation's culture with others. Assisting with this transition involves displaying authentic curiosity of and appreciation for what an ISA is used to, in addition to sharing how U.S. culture operates.

Practitioners should also consider the merits of diversity and inclusion training, specifically cultural competency (see Copper et al., 2017). These forms of training were discussed by most participants, either as a need or as good business practice, and provide valuable opportunities for practitioners to become more culturally competent (e.g., Livingstone, 2014; Lynch, 2011). It is difficult for athletic administrators and coaches to aid an ISA in their transition into American culture absent any knowledge and appreciation of the ISA's cultural background. Learning about an ISA's cultural background may help athletic administrators and coaches to better bond with their ISAs, while also informing them of important events/holidays those ISAs might want to celebrate. Practically, using a Brazilian student-athlete as an example, think of how much it would mean to them if their coaches organized a celebratory event on September 7, Brazil's Independence Day. Such an event would undoubtedly make that ISA feel appreciated and valued.

Finally, practitioners should consider the programming suggestions offered by the interviewees in this study as potential ISA support service options at their institutions. Programming might include discussing ISAs during orientation, creating ISA-specific support groups, and/or forming a committee of coaches that are tasked with discussing ISA-related issues. Additionally, the athletic department could ask ISAs to give talks on their home country for their peers, coaches, and support staff. These talks would show the ISA that their athletic department is interested in learning more about who they are and where they were raised. If a practitioner's institution does not already have ISA-specific support programming, they may not be meeting the needs of their ISAs. Recall, Rodriguez's (2014) opinion that ISAs face additional stressors to those encountered by their domestic student-athlete peers. Thus, it is important to make sure that efforts are continuously being made to accommodate and support ISAs, while also obtaining information about the efficacy of those efforts and the ways in which they might be improved.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our participant pool was limited to one specific mid-major Division I university. To that end, future research studies should focus on large, Power 5 Division I institutions. Since those institutions typically have access to, and can afford the best resources, learning how they are assisting their ISAs merits attention. Additionally, understanding

how Division II and Division III institutions assist their ISAs with transitioning to the United States deserves examination as well. Another limitation of this investigation involves sport coverage. Although we spoke with basketball, field hockey, soccer, and tennis coaches, future research should include golf and ice hockey coaches due to the prevalence of ISAs in those sports. The final limitation of this study is the omission of ISA opinions on the topic of transitioning into the American university and educational setting. Future studies should strive to compare what ISAs' believe they need with what athletics stakeholders' feel they need to best support this population.

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