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## Thrown to the Wolves: The Obstacles and Barriers of International Student Athletes Prior to and During Enrollment in American Universities

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THROWN TO THE WOLVES: THE OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS OF INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENT ATHLETES PRIOR TO AND DURING ENROLLMENT IN AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITIES

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THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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BY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO: METHODS	4
Introduction of Interviewees	4
Sampling	8
Interviews	11
Analysis	12
CHAPTER THREE: IMPLICATIONS	13
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	20
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the University of Michigan won the men's NCAA Division I swimming championships by a landslide. A team from SwimSwam, a world swimming news website, did some number crunching after the meet and discovered that out of the 2,015 points scored by individual swimmers in the meet, 770 of those points were by international athletes (Keith, 2013). That represents 38.2%. Had international swimmers been removed from the scoring, the Golden Bears of Cal Berkley would have been the victors. Michigan topped the charts for most points scored by international athletes, with 155. Cal came in ninth with only 28 points scored individually by internationals (Keith, 2013).

Ever since the popularity of overseas recruiting has grown exponentially, many of today's NCAA tournaments have become nothing shy of a World Championships or the Olympics. John Bale, author of *The Brawn Drain*, explains this idea using a three-tiered model of sport and its globalization: reality (global, practiced in every nation), ideology (USA sports), and experience (intercollegiate sport). An example illustrates the point; "The implications of achievement in sport at the college or local level can be felt when a foreign student-athlete is awarded an athletic scholarship at the expense of a local high-school student. Locally, this might appear frustrating or unjust, but according to national ideology it is acceptable because winning for the college is paramount."

The global idea of sport fuels the recruitment of international student-athletes in the U.S. In order to win, colleges need to diversify. American universities accommodate more students per capita than any other country and thus we have created a pattern of schools competing for athletes, both domestic and international (Bale, 1991). This research project focuses on the impact that coaches, universities, and athletic departments have on the experiences of international student athletes. In order to continue with this strategy of international recruiting, it is vital to address any flaws the system might have from the perspective of those who must endure it. Essentially, this view invites the research question:

What are international student athletes' obstacles and barriers prior to enrollment and upon maintaining that enrollment successfully?

Freeman explains that the shift from a club environment to the NCAA Division I environment is a difficult transition to navigate for first-year international student-athletes (ISA's) (2009). These athletes have never been exposed to a life where academics and athletics are held so close. Many ISA's believe that their teachers and professors at home pay no regard to athletic endeavors and will not stand for missed class because of competition or practice. These parts of their lives, sports and academics, are held completely separate. This differs from American-born student-athletes, who have grown up in a club or high school sport environment where it is the norm to continue on to play sports in college. For ISA's, cultural and linguistic barriers only exacerbate these unaccustomed transitions.

It is inherent that universities provide the necessary support systems for ISA's coming to the United States to study and train because our unique system perpetuates global sport. Without the United States system other programs like the Olympics and international club sports could see a great decline in quality athletes. The research on this phenomenon through the lenses of

ISA's themselves is few. In a project conducted by Kontaxakis in 2011, he discusses that the research on ISA's is lacking. However, he examines the influences of recruitment and retention. He came up with three common themes regarding both phenomena. This type of research is well paired with that of this project because it is much more broad. Kontaxakis displays the pre and post impacts of students coming into the U.S., where as this project fits right in the middle. Only through ISA's experiences can we learn how to improve or maintain the systems we have put in place in the U.S.

With this project, the experiences of international students illustrate the compounding effects of also being a collegiate athlete. Smith and Khawaja, in their 2001 review, discuss that being in a new culture has the potential to transform from purely a life changing event to a stressor. These stressors as effects of acculturation can be social, educational, and linguistic. All can be felt by international students, however, having the added stress of competing in a sport for your school can be demanding for ISA's. Smith and Khawaja do not discuss the effects of acculturation on ISA's, however their work may be used to understand further just how much ISA's must deal with upon entering an American university. Their research also explains mental health issues brought on by acculturation stresses. When paired with the work of Emily Newell (2015), we can understand the causes of the ISA's obstacles and barriers as well as how to offer them a more holistic support system while in school. If one aspect is left unrecognized, whether it be academics, athletics, or mental health, the successfulness and morale of the ISA is critically reduced. This project hopes to fill in the holes between both of these works.

## CHAPTER TWO METHODS

### **Introductions of interviewees**

#### **Aada, Finland**

A senior at Rice University who came to the US in high school as an exchange student in Kentucky, later decided Finland was too small and she wanted to broaden her horizons by attending university here as well. Choosing Rice was a hard decision for her. Other schools were recruiting her intensely and she had friends attending other schools who she knew from Finland. Ultimately, the decision to choose Rice was made easier by her father's suggestions. Adapting to her new coach and to practices affected her first couple years. Aada is an intense swimmer who is tough on herself and understands what works for her in regards to swimming. Because of this, she saw much conflict with her coach and his coaching style in the beginning. She believes coaches need to be upfront about expectations and practice styles upfront as this would have made her transition to a new team more smooth.

#### **Jacob, England**

A senior at Auburn University, Jacob began looking for high-level swimming teams while still in boarding school after he just missed a chance at the Olympics in 2012. During this search, Joe sought the help of friends who had gone to America to swim for advice on cultural perspectives and how the recruiting process worked. After the tough choice to come visit three schools in the U.S., he had decided on Auburn. A home away from home. He had a fairly easy time adjusting to US culture and to the university being from an English speaking country. Following this

whole process, Joe believes that coming on recruiting trips was much better than finding out information on websites.

### **Julietta, Iceland**

A graduate of Florida International University, Julietta was not enthused about swimming in the U.S. following her retirement from the sport two years earlier. A family friend of hers, whose daughter was already swimming at a school in the U.S. was in fact doing all the work of contacting coaches and looking at schools for her. Following two unofficial visits to schools in Florida, she decided on FIU. Three weeks before school began she applied for her visa and decided she should probably tell her parents she was moving to Miami. Upon her arrival, her lack of academic motivation and struggles with the language made her first year difficult.

Swimming wasn't easy either. But after seeking help from teammates, coaches, and academic advisors, she found a groove and things got much easier. She believes that the language barrier was the most difficult thing for her.

### **Katerin, Sweden**

Also a graduate of FIU, a new environment for swimming and new opportunities motivated Katerin to search for schools in the U.S. After researching schools online, she decided to send emails to coaches at schools where the weather was warm or schools she had heard about on TV or in movies (ex. UCLA). She received a few offers for scholarships and chose FIU because of the scholarship they offered her. After committing to FIU, she was worried she might never end up at school because of all the paperwork she had trouble with. Her lack of knowledge of the U.S. university system was troublesome before arriving at school, as it was difficult to understand what she needed to complete and what things like majors were, for example. However, it allowed her to be open to new experiences and challenges once arriving.

**Kimmy, South Africa**

A current junior at FIU, Kimmy was really drawn to the U.S. for its unique sports and study system. She excelled in swimming at home and realized she could probably get a large scholarship to come to the U.S., as many of her friends had done. She was recruited and offered scholarships by over 12 schools, many of which had contacted her without her first showing interest. When she arrived at FIU in December during the team's training trip, she was mainly left to discover university life on her own. Luckily, her academic advisor was able to help her register for classes, fill out any last minute paperwork, and even show her where the pool was. Because of Kimmy's unique school system and circumstances at home, she had difficulties with obtaining a visa and sending in her final grade reports when needed. She wishes there had been a more streamlined process.

**Leo, Mexico**

A current senior at University of Utah, Leo actively sought the help of old teammates who had gone to Texas A&M for help while searching for schools. Once he knew he definitely wanted to go to the U.S. to study and swim, his parents decided he needed to improve his English. So, they sent him to swim with a team in California for the summer. There, he was actively recruited by Utah and was offered to come on an official visit. Upon arriving at the school, he quickly forgot about his dreams to go to Texas A&M and signed with Utah. He had a hard time adjusting to the cultural differences and the language. He claims that its unfortunate that as the years go by his English gets better but his classes get harder!

**Alexandra, Switzerland**

Alexandra attended her first year in the U.S. at the University of Tennessee but then transferred and graduated from Florida International University. After visiting three schools on official

visits, she fell in love with University of Tennessee, even though she would only receive two years of eligibility. The night before she was to leave for the U.S., her visa had still not arrived and delayed her arrival to January. Upon arrival, Alexandra quickly realized that her dream school had not been portrayed as it should have during her recruiting trip. She struggled to get along with her coach, who was inexperienced with European swimmers, and she was terribly homesick. Luckily, her team had the help of a mentor for international students and she claims that this woman helped keep her sane during her short time at Tennessee. She realizes now that a team with more Americans would not help her become “Americanized”, but only make her transition miserable.

### **Pauline, Canada/Columbia**

A graduate of FIU, Pauline ran into many complications upon her attempt to transfer to her school in Miami. Because she had begun her studies at a Canadian university, FIU docked her a year of swimming eligibility. The task of translating high school transcripts in two languages and one year of university transcripts to an incompatible system (in the U.S.) ended Pauline in many classes she had already taken. Her financial situation did not afford her the opportunity to be in school without a swimming scholarship, yet her desired degree was going to take longer than three years to complete. She believes that not being able to work really hindered her situation at an American university and that internationals burden the U. S. system by taking up university spots but then not being able to work in this country after graduation.

### **Victoria, Canada/Dominican Republic**

Currently a junior at Florida Gulf Coast University, she is eligible to swim on the national teams of two countries. She did all of her school research online, only looking at schools where the weather was warm. She emailed a few schools stating that she was interested, however FGCU

was not one of them. The coach reached out to her and invited her on a trip and it just so happened to check all of her boxes: small class sizes, mid-range school, and great weather. She did not have any trouble adjusting to American life having grown up in Canada, but being away from home was hard. She made use of her schools mentoring program which helped her with schoolwork and organization. However, she wishes there were more activities for international students at her school.

### **Yui, Hong Kong**

A junior at Florida Gulf Coast University, Yui, like many others, chose a school based on the climate. When she first began looking at schools, she contacted old teammates for advice about the recruiting process and about their experiences in the U.S. She was approached by many schools, but landed on FGCU because of the scholarship she was offered. After signing, her aunt assisted her with the school paperwork, since her parents did not know any English. While in school she has made use of tutors for many different classes and finds them very helpful. However, she wishes she could have taken more English classes in the beginning.

### **Sampling**

This project entailed interviewing ten international student-athletes who are currently enrolled or who have graduated from an American Division I university. All athletes are or were swimmers – no divers or track and field athletes. By interviewing only swimmers, the project provided a close look at the experiences of athletes in a non-revenue sport with a rich international history and following. These swimmers also come from a club-based background in their home countries, where athletics and academics were completely separate most of the time. This differs from the American system where high school sports are integrated into the school

and are encouraged for students. Teachers in the American system understand the necessary commitments these sports require and the status it provides for the school and the student.

The athletes in this project represented 11 different countries. Two athletes who were natives of Canada, competed internationally for another country (Dominican Republic) or had attended high school in another country (Columbia). Six universities were represented from four different conferences, all Division I, two “Power Five” conferences (SEC and Pac-12) and two mid-major conferences (C-USA and CCSA).

Sampling began with Florida International University, as this was the researcher’s alma mater. The school’s swimming and diving coaches provided several names of coaches whom they believed might be interested in having their athletes participate in this research project. This snowball type sampling was effective because it provided coaches at other schools with a familiar name to reference with that of the researchers. In addition to the emails and calls made by the researcher, the FIU coaches also sent out emails stating that their former athlete was conducting a research project and needed volunteers. This type of sampling yielded four volunteers from three different schools. The FIU coaches also informed their international athletes of this research project and requested that they participate. From this request, one volunteer was generated.

The second type of sampling used was convenience sampling. This type of sampling allowed more a larger availability of possible volunteers. With convenience sampling, coaches from schools all over the nation were contacted regarding their international athletes’ viable participation. Coaches were discovered using the NCAA Sports Sponsorship database, which allows the user to see all the schools who offer each sport in each division (Division I, II, or III). For this project, the report for swimming and diving schools (public and private) in Division I

was requested. From there, each school's swimming and diving roster pages were found online, men and women, and any school that had more than three or four international athletes on their roster were sent an email to the head and assistant coaches requesting volunteers. Because athletes are still under the jurisdiction of the university, coaches needed to be contacted first to request volunteers, in hopes that they would forward the information to their international athletes. Any athlete who was interested in participating would then contact the researcher, freely providing their email and personal information.

With convenience sampling, coaches from 38 different universities across the U.S. and among different conferences were contacted. A few responded that they were too busy or that most of their international students had gone home. Some had auto-responses that they were out of the office for the summer for Olympic training. This type of sampling generated one volunteer.

The final volunteers were hand selected, graduated international athletes who agreed to participate following a request by the researcher. However, the decision to interview graduated students did not alter the outcome of the data that was collected. These students encountered the same experiences as the current students, only their responses were from many years earlier. These graduated students still researched schools, had the opportunity to come on recruiting trips, completed the necessary paperwork, and encountered obstacles along the way. These volunteers were easily obtained since the athletes were no longer under the jurisdiction of the university and their information was readily available to the researcher. These requests generated four participants from two schools.

## Interviews

Once the athletes demonstrated interest in participating, they coordinated times and dates for the interview with the researcher. Additionally, the researcher would email information sheets explaining the athlete's rights when participating in this project and reassuring them that no identifying information would be shared. The athlete was asked to verbally announce that they had viewed the information sheet and that they were willingly volunteering to participate, at the start of the interview.

Seven interviews took place on the researcher's personal computer using Skype, one over the phone, and two using FaceTime. All interviews, regardless of method used, were recorded on the researcher's personal computer using the audio recording program, Audacity. These audio transmissions were later saved both in a file on the computer and in a cloud-type storage area.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. In that structured questions covered a general topic but with some follow-up questions as well, based on the interviewees responses. This interview type allowed for ease and personalization from both the researcher and the interviewee. The goal of the interview was to obtain constructionist type data. Authors Rubin & Rubin explain that this type of data allows for the researcher to view the problem through the lens of the interviewee and their experiences (2012). These experiences bring new meaning and understanding to the phenomena and "the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them, how people interpret what they encounter, and how they assign meanings and values to events and objects" (2012). The project aimed to seek how these ISA's experienced the same event and what similarities could be discerned in order to further improve or maintain the actions of coaches and universities.

## Analysis

The researcher, using only the recordings created from Audacity, transcribed the recorded interviews by hand. At the completion of each transcription, each interviewee received a copy to be read through to check for errors or misinterpretations. The interviewees were instructed to respond if they noticed anything that needed to be amended. This process ensured that the athlete was portrayed in the interview as how they had intended and to clear up any miscommunications or incorrect transcriptions made by the researcher.

The researcher then read through the transcriptions to determine any similarities or themes in the responses of the athletes. This thematic analysis allowed for the data to be quantified. During the analysis, the researcher made notes on 17 different occurrences in the transcriptions which lead to five final themes. These themes included:

- Lack of information/flawed expectation
- Paperwork issues
- Sought help from ex-teammates
- Services from university were helpful
- Language barriers

These themes suggest the elements that made up the ISA's positive and negative experiences with applying for and successfully maintaining enrollment in a US university. From these themes, final recommendations and calls for further research can be determined.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IMPLICATIONS

As stated previously, this project was a small pilot study intended to test a research design with a small group of student athletes. Initially, the plans for this project had been slightly larger with hopes to interview 15-20 student-athletes from both Division I swimming & diving and track & field teams. The intention for selecting these sports was to sample athletes from non-revenue sports who have a very small ‘professional’ population, yet who have a large international base. Essentially, these athletes come to the US because they are passionate about their sport and they don’t compete for the fame or the dream of making millions playing professionally. However, many are training to represent their country in the Olympics.

However, the plans for this project fought many battles along the way. To begin, the conducting year of research happened to also be an Olympic year. Per a news article from the NCAA, over 1,000 current, incoming, and former NCAA student-athletes competed at the Rio Olympics. 168 of them current students. Swimming and athletics being the most represented sports ("2016 Rio Olympics: Current NCAA student-athletes competing by school", 2017). This is also a very busy time for high-level, Division I coaches, as many of them are invited to coach Olympic teams. For example, Mark Gangloff coaching his Missouri Tigers for Olympic trials and Randy Horner coaching Botswana’s swimming team in Rio. Because of the ethics and protocol of research, coaches had to be contacted first in order to obtain interview volunteers; as these athletes are still within the custody and administration of the university. This created some

challenges in collecting interviews as many high-level coaches and athletes were participating in the Olympics, thus making it extremely difficult to contact them. After months of trying to reach current athletes, the research turned to interviewing students who had already graduated and were autonomous of any university regulation. As most of the data collected was asking student-athletes to recollect experiences from home to when they first began university, the information gathered from graduated students was no different from current students. Their having graduated did not skew the data. In fact, it appeared as if they would more freely provide information.

As a result of the limitations of this project, it is imperative that further research be done on this subject. Following the conclusion of the data from this project, it is believed that the need to research the effects of mentorship and school/sports psychology on ISA's adjustment and overall wellbeing is extremely important. Fifty-percent of the athletes that were interviewed said that they saw a mentor or psychologist, whether compulsory or not, and all received positive experiences. The athletes viewed these mentors and psychologists as people whom they could confide in for many different issues such as homesickness, stress, academics, and culture shock. Newell claims that "although informal mentor relationships may naturally develop, establishment of formal mentor-mentee pairs provides ISAs with a designated advisor who guides, supports, and cheers them through the transitional period into life as a student-athlete" (Newell, 2015). Building trust and allowing the ISA to discuss and seek support for their academic, athletic, or personal problem is key in helping them to succeed. Newell also explains that a holistic type of support is best for ISA adjustment, as social and cultural adjustment hardships can effect all other aspects of university life. This means that athletic departments, coaches, professors, advisors, and mentors need to work together to create comprehensive support systems for these incoming athletes.

It should be understood that ISA's frequently have more to overcome than domestic SA's and thus should be taken care of differently. The outcome of this project shows that ISA's enjoy and benefit from the support systems that they have already in place, yet they feel there could be more provided. As Newell claims; often the cultural and linguistic challenges of ISA's are overlooked by advisors (2015). This is unfortunate because universities should be taking the time to invest time into their ISA's as they have often times already invested their money. Retention of ISA's remains important to universities because they offer diversity to the university, maturity, and often more experience in large meets than the average domestic athlete. "Sports and community were intimately linked to the growth of the American system of higher education", stated Bale in his 1991 book *The Brawn Drain*. Sports offer visibility to the university. And the more wins, the more visibility they receive. As Roy Benson, a Florida track and field coach explained, "coaches who want to win at all costs will go for foreigners" (Jara, 2015).

In order to maintain the steady flow of ISA's to the US we need to work on support systems when they arrive but also support systems *before* they arrive. Almost all the athletes who were interviewed expressed that many of the challenges they faced were related to lack of knowledge. This lack of knowledge is often times realized upon arrival, but it can also be felt at home. This research stands true with that of Kontaxakis, who also found that the ISA's he interviewed faced challenges filling out paperwork at home because of the differences in educational systems between that of the US and their home country (2011). These issues of confusion by the student-athlete are often times exacerbated by the cultural and language barriers as well.

It is imperative that we address where a large portion of this information is gathered: the coaches. While the potential athlete might be able to conduct research on his or her university online or speak with someone in the international office, ultimately the coach is providing much of the information about the school, the athletic program, and the NCAA to the potential athlete. While it is not the intention of this project to further burden the coaches of collegiate athletic programs across America, they must realize that they are the trusted source. They are often the athletes' first point of communication within the university during the recruiting process. Logically, any question the athlete might have is going to hit the coach first.

For coaches and universities, the main goal is setting their ISA's up for success in all aspects of university life. It's projects like this one that allow coaches and universities to get a first-hand glimpse at things they are doing right and things they could improve on. As stated earlier, the ISA's from this project struggled mostly because of the lack of things they knew up front. It appears as if they felt they 'weren't set up for success'. From this outcome, the research beckons a policy recommendation. From statements such as "I didn't know you could go on recruiting trips" and "I [didn't] even know what a major [was]!" ("Thrown to the Wolves: The Obstacles and Barriers of International Student Athletes Prior to and During Enrollment in American Universities, "Katerin", 2016) to "I didn't know my transcripts had to be officially translated" ("Leo", 2016) it is apparent that ISA's need guidance. Coaches need to be able to work seamlessly with athletic departments and international offices "to provide support services that address the issues specific to ISA's" (Newell, 2015). They should be well versed in the protocols, timelines, paperwork, and points of contact for their university, as they should expect many questions from ISA's regarding these topics.

None of the athletes interviewed in this project expressed that they had access to any kind of timeline for testing, paperwork, or things that needed to be completed before they arrived. They relied on their coaches, athletic departments, and international offices to contact them when something needed to be turned in. Sometimes this became difficult. One athlete, Kimmy, had difficulty with her admittance because her final reports from high school did not all arrive at the same time so she was forced to send them separately, which led to issues getting a visa. Additionally, she filled out the athletics and compliance paperwork at home then had to fill them out again when she arrived at school without knowing why or where her original papers ended up. She said that having an outline of what to do would have been helpful because people make mistakes without organization.

Steps with reference to test scores, visas, admissions, compliance and amateurism, and physicals should be spelled out and provided for the ISA at the onset of interest. Assumptions that ISA's understand all that is asked of them during this long and arduous process at home, prevents ISA's from mitigating any of these issues. Student affairs professionals and those working with athletics must understand the many vexing issues ISA's overcome when coming to the US. It is understood that these timelines might be different for each school, but at least the interested athlete will have a better idea of what he or she needs to accomplish before becoming an SA in the US. For example, in Sweden, school or sports physicals are not a popular procedure for schools, as Katerin explained in her interview. So, when it came time to have one done for going to university in America, she was scrambling and was unsure of who to contact or where to go to receive one. Eventually she was able to contact a parent of a former swimmer she knew who helped her find a doctor in another town who could perform the physical. Had she known about the need for a physical earlier in the process, she could have had that contact ready and an

appointment made ahead of time. Sometimes the tasks that need completing before beginning school are things that domestic students are able to easily access. Often we do not understand the other cultures in which ISA's come from and that their home may not be favorable to this system. Newell (2015), referencing the work of Andrade from 2005, showed that many issues that international students encounter overlap that of domestic students. The difference only lies in the additional cultural and language barriers that exacerbate the struggles felt by foreigners. In order to perpetuate the tradition of global sport in America, we must address how we can improve.

A recommendation for the potential ISA: Every US university now has a website with virtual tours, photos, and information regarding location, housing, student life, athletics, academics, and more. It is no wonder every athlete interviewed in this current project stated that they used the internet in some capacity to research schools in the US. If you are using these resources, check your sources for currency and accuracy. See that universities are updating their pages and be sure to triangulate your internet research with other sites and blogs, but also with coaches, potential teammates, and friends who might have gone to study and play in the US before you. Often those friends have insight about a team's reputation regarding athletics or academics that might not be readily available online.

In addition to asking your friends for advice, ask potential coaches. Ask them everything. Sixty percent of the athletes in this project felt as if they arrived at university having been not fully informed about the goings on of the team or the university. Be sure that this new potential coach has a coaching or practice style that you are comfortable with. Aada spent two years at her university struggling with her swimming because of a new coaching style that she felt she was not compatible with. She enjoyed her team and her school but this challenge with swimming beat

her down mentally as well as physically, thus affecting her schoolwork and well-being. You have the right to know what to expect before you arrive and there are a great number of people there to help you.

If you have questions regarding your visa, academic eligibility, testing, and registering for classes that your coach is not be able to answer, ask them to refer you to someone in the athletics department or international office. If you feel as if speaking about these subjects are confusing in the beginning, see if your school has a translator or another athlete who speaks your native language. They might be able to explain the paperwork and the processes a bit more easily.

Lastly, be sure to stay organized. ISA's have many things to keep track of and mail before arriving to the US, so do not wait until the last minute. Learn how your country's visa process works within enough time to get yours. Júlietta, from the small country of Iceland, was able to receive her visa only a few weeks before leaving for the US. While Alexandra, from Switzerland, had to forfeit her arrival for the Fall semester because her visa arrived after the last registration date for her school. These stressors may be alleviated by asking questions and speaking with the right people. Results from Meadows, Pierce, and Popp's 2011 work about ISA recruitment perspectives shows that pressures of adjustment lead to academic failure and even dropouts (Newell, 2015). Understand the university is there to help you; use them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The goal of this project was learn from ISA's what their biggest struggles were in coming to the US. Although this project produced significant qualitative data, it may not have yielded enough interviewees to gather any generalized findings. Simply the testing of the research design was imperative. This pilot project sought to discover themes in the obstacles and barriers of international student-athletes in a select population of Division 1 swimmers. The three themes discussed most by interviewees were:

1. The feeling of being ill-informed/having to overcome unanticipated tasks or issues
2. Difficulty with completing the necessary paperwork
3. Language/cultural barriers

Most of the interviewees explained that these obstacles mostly occurred while they were still at home or during their first year at their new American university.

Interviewees discussed the first theme in regards to many different topics often with the words "I didn't know", "I had no idea", and "No one told me". For Júlíetta from Iceland, her connection with this theme lie in her orientation day. She explains that prior to arriving at school, she was not informed of having to complete an orientation day nor any tests in addition to it. "We walked all over school and then at the end of the day I was put in a room to take two tests. They threw me into a math test and I didn't know any meth in English so I failed the test and they put me in intermediate algebra. I had to take a reading test too and it was right after the math test, so I failed that too. It was really bad", Júlíetta claimed.

Other athletes stated that they felt misinformed about their living arrangements or dorm rooms. For ISA's who are not able to visit the schools before signing, they often are doing research purely via the internet. In this way, ISA's can only infer as to how their living arrangements might appear. One ISA who was interviewed said that because she was not able to come on a trip to the school in which she signed, her father made her watch every virtual tour on the school's website. For most, this is their only option and when reality does not follow what is on the internet, it can create feelings of dissatisfaction on top of all the other feelings racing through an ISA when starting school.

According to Jara (2002), athletic motivations are one of the biggest reasons ISA's seek coming to the U.S. However, three ISA's shared that the athletic part of university was the biggest misconception for them. For some, swimming was great; it forced them to lose weight, it brought about a new love for the sport, or the team was welcoming and wonderful. However, for others, swimming was a new challenge that they had not planned for. We should understand that every coach in every sport differs in the culture in which they foster on their team and in their style of coaching. This is unavoidable. One ISA, Aada from Finland, feels as if coaches should communicate to incoming swimmers how they like to coach. Aada had an extremely hard time adjusting to swimming in the States. She said, "Just changing coaches in general, even without like changing countries or something, is hard because you don't know how they want you to do their sets. I think coaches need to be extra careful in explaining how they want things done". Aada makes a fantastic point in that in addition to the stresses of swimming with a new team in a new country, not understanding what your coach expects from you can add more problems. She also argued that not being able to cope with the new swim practice style really burned her up mentally. The pressure of having a scholarship and wanting to please her coach and her school

really took a toll on her in the pool and in the classroom. Aada and her coach would often get into arguments during practices. Additionally, her new practicing style caused her to be run-down and tired most of the time, which reflected in her academics. For many ISA's, including Aada, the American swimming system is much more competitive than their home country's. Popp, Hums, and Greenwall (2009) explain that US student-athletes tend to place a higher priority on competition as compared to internationals. This new competitiveness can be a shock for many ISA's who would usually be on their country's national swim team and here in the States they struggle to score points for their team.

One of the most interesting cases regarding the first theme was from Katerin. Katerin is a native of Sweden and during her first few hours at school, she felt 'thrown' into an orientation. During her orientation, she was instructed to choose which major she wanted. Having only been in the States a few hours and being in a huge ballroom with a bunch of Americans – she was completely overwhelmed. Mostly because she had no idea what a major even was! Katerin shared with me that she wished there had been someone at home to explain how the American university system worked. "You need to know what you're going to study. Somebody should have told me. Because I feel like at least for us internationals, it was literally like being thrown into a completely new world blind. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing and maybe [it would have been better] if I had some meat on my bones before I went over there" ("Katerin", 2016). Sarkodie-Mensah (1998) suggested that institutions provide an orientation just for internationals, which explain how the US university culture works and what types of services are available to them on campus. These smaller, more specialized orientations might serve ISA's more efficiently as they would not be so overwhelming.

The second theme, overcoming difficulties in paperwork, mostly is a challenge while the athlete is still in their home country, before starting school. Waiting for visas, obtaining old transcripts, and trying to navigate foreign legislation is all part of what one ISA explained as ‘a paper war’. Kimmy from South Africa felt as if her biggest challenge in this ‘paper war’ was having to repeatedly send papers to the US. While she was working on getting everything in order for her university, she was still finishing school. Therefore, each time she completed something or received a report of her grades in the mail, she would have to send it individually. “I wish I had a little bit more direction”, she says, “I would have rather sent it all at the end”.

For others, the problems with the paperwork involved interpretation and translation. For Katerin, it was trying to decipher what an ‘athletic physical’ was. Physicals are not a popular thing in Sweden, unlike here in the States where most children have to get them in lower school or to play sports in high school. She had to seek out the help of a former teammates father to help her find a doctor who could help her complete the physical. Then the challenge was trying to translate the medical jargon in order to fill out the form. She admitted that they ended up just guessing and luckily everything turned out to be alright and she had no health issues.

A more complicated experience was that of Pauline from Canada. Pauline spent most of her high school years at a school in Columbia while still interacting with her school in Canada, thus she graduated twice and had two high school transcripts in two different languages. Upon trying to transfer to an American university to swim after her first year at a Canadian university, Pauline ran into a slew of problems once she arrived at school. It was assumed that she had already spent a year ‘competing’ with a swim program at her Canadian university, so she was denied a year of eligibility. On top of that, her foreign schooling was incompatible to the American system. Although she had completed the equivalent of American A.P. courses in

Columbia, she was denied credit for them. “The first two years that I was there were just a joke”, she explained in regards to her college course content.

These problems in eligibility and course repeats cause Pauline to have to sacrifice the degree she wanted (chemical engineering) because she did not have the time or the financial aid to complete this rigorous four-year degree. Consequently, Pauline was forced to change her degree to liberal studies in order to finish on time. Clark and Parette (2002) believe that student-athletes should be advised in specific areas of academic pursuits and transitions. This task will fall into the hands of SA advisors, meaning that they should be knowledgeable about foreign transfers and how to assist other college departments in situations such as Pauline’s.

The last theme, language and cultural barriers, is arguably the most obvious. For most athletes, the language and cultural barrier can begin at home and even continue into their first few years in university. Beginning with just simply communicating with coaches or college departments and completing applications and paperwork, language can be very stressful for many athletes. One interviewee, Yui from Hong Kong said it was her parents who struggled with the language. They wanted to be involved in this process, but their own barriers kept Yui from sharing with them.

Many athletes argued that one of the hardest things was the cultural shock of coming to a new country. Not knowing what to buy at the grocery store, sitting in an advanced biology lecture in English, interacting with new people in a foreign language, all of these things can make an ISA’s head spin. A Mexican ISA, Leo, shared with me that it took him a while to adapt to American customs, “The example I always give to people is in Mexico or even in Europe when we say hi we kiss the cheek of the other person, like of a girl. I came here [to the States] doing the same thing and the girls freak out!” Newell (2015) claims that cultural and linguistic

challenges are often overlooked but that these challenges can affect nearly every aspect of the ISA's acclimation process. The pressures felt by every student-athlete are compounded for ISA's because of these cultural and linguistic barriers. An example being an athlete with an injury. Being injured is something extremely stressful for an athlete because it means more time in the training room, the possibility of not competing or practicing, and just being in pain. One ISA described that trying to explain to her athletic trainer where she was hurting was near impossible; "I didn't know any muscles or body parts or how to describe my injury. There's a gazillion types of pain and you have the words for them in your own language but not in English". In a project conducted by Berry and colleagues, they conceptualize that cognitively, acculturation can begin as 'life changes' and thus not a source of stress. However, if an international student does not have sufficient coping mechanisms, these life changes can become acculturative stressors (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Although it is difficult to hear that these ISA's endured these obstacles and barriers in their experience at an American university, one athlete I interviewed happened to experience every theme concluded by the data of all the interviews. She allowed this project to go into more detail with her story.

Alexandra was a high-level athlete in Switzerland looking for something bigger and better in her swimming career and she knew the US could provide her with that. She researched and spoke with many high-level schools and coaches and decided to come for a few recruiting trips. Upon arriving at her second school, she fell in love, "I knew right away. I was like 'This is the school I want to be at. This is everything I imagined'. And I loved the team. So by then I was sure". So, it was settled. Alexandra was off to a big conference school to become 'Americanized', like she had always dreamed

Once she committed to her new school, Alexandra learned that she would only receive two years of eligibility to swim because of her extensive years in high school. However, she was determined not let this deter her. She diligently worked on completing her paperwork for school as best she could. The summer finally came to an end and she had readied her bags to ship off to America, but one thing was missing. Her visa had not yet arrived. Her school's international office called and told her that if she was not on campus by the add/drop date to register for classes, she would not be allowed to begin this semester. The add/drop date came and went and Alexandra still did not her visa. "Do you still want to come?" the new coach asked. Again, she was not going to let this deter her, so she waited until January to join her new team in the States.

Come January, Alexandra learned that she would not be living with any teammates. This was jarring news to her as she knew these people would not be her teammates and the language barrier did not help either. However, trying to get to know her new teammates was just as challenging, "I'm a very shy person so at the beginning, when we had like team stuff, I wouldn't talk. I would only talk when it was one-to-one or in a little group. So they [the team] were already assuming I was stupid because I didn't talk", she revealed. Alexandra shared that she had wanted a team with Americans so that she could become 'Americanized'.

A few months into school Alexandra realized that maybe choosing a team with some more internationals would have been a better fit for her as the assimilation process would not have been so drastic. She also felt that her new coach had difficulty engaging with different cultures and international athletes because he had had little experience with them. Alexandra explained that far too often her coach would come down on her for being different and not adapting to the culture of the team and of America just as fast as he wanted her to

“So for me everything was new and my coach wasn’t used to that because we didn’t have many international athletes. So all the time he was finding stuff that I did wrong. He was like ‘You have to cheer for your teammates! You have to do this, you have to do this!’ There were a lot of misunderstandings and there were a lot of cultural misunderstandings for him. It wasn’t me, it was just how I was used to doing things. It was how I was brought up, its different. He was never able to handle that.”

Alexandra explains this part of her life as one of the hardest things she has ever had to go through. She wasn’t comfortable. She didn’t feel like part of a team; she was just a number. At this point she had really discovered the hidden secrets of her new teams deceitful recruiting style. Essentially her coach was telling all of his athletes what to say to the recruits and to show up at the pool with a smile on their faces.

Instead of quitting, Alexandra decided to go home for the summer and take a break from swimming and all the drama that was going on around her at school. During her time at home, her coach called and informed her that she should just stay at home as he was not allowing her back on the team. Unfortunately, that was how her first year at an American university ended.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This project's main focus was to test a research design with a small, selective group of ISA's. The goal in the beginning stages was to interview 20 swimming and track athletes from universities all over the country. Due to factors such as the year of research being an Olympic year and experiencing difficulty recruiting athletes, the initial research model needed to be altered. The number of interviewees went down to 10 and it was decided that graduated athletes would be easier to contact while still obtaining the same type and quality of information from their interviews. Graduated athletes were autonomous and not under the direction of a university, so it was not necessary to contact coaches first. Although these athletes' stories were not as recent, they still shared many of the same experiences as the athletes who were currently enrolled in school. Additionally, this project yielded no track athlete volunteers. So the project was modified to be a specific case study of swimmers only. The data obtained did not seem to be tainted due to the necessary changes to the initial project plan.

To conclude the project, it should be known that Alexandra's story might be extreme, however it shows how compounding obstacles can make for a dismal and challenging experience for an ISA. Jara (2002) summarizes Popp, Pierce, and Hums' *A comparison of the college selection process for international and domestic student-athletes at NCAA Division I universities*, in presenting some of the factors that help direct a student-athlete in their decision-

making process such as: “knowledge and awareness of host country, level of personal recommendations influential to the student, cost of attendance issues, physical and educational environment or climate of the institution, geographic proximity to the home country, and social links to the host country”. It is standard, even with the interviewees in this project, that their first and only contact with the university is from one of the coaches. This coach becomes one of the leading factors in the ISA’s decision and thus the salesman of the university. This idea supports the main conclusion of this project that ISA’s simply wish to be informed of what needs to be done, what to expect, and how the system works.

Whether an ISA has a chance to come to a school for a recruiting trip or not, most of the time they endure a period where they simply feel as if they don’t have all the information. Wilcox (1994) explains that pre-departure and post-arrival cross-cultural training is essential for the person who is travelling to a new country. This type of training is used to help lessen the effects of culture shock and should include topics such as interpersonal skills, cross-cultural interactions/adjustment and culture shock, professional and communication competencies, and problem areas and barriers and personal qualities. By providing these types of services will limit struggles and confusion in the new language and system (Kontaxakis, 2011).

These concepts of misinformation are not often brought up by researchers and they cast a light on the holes in the international recruiting and adjustment process. This knowledge of the needs and wants of ISA’s will help athletic departments, coaches, and other college administrators develop better marketing and adjustment services for them (Kontaxakis, 2011). Newell (2015) explains that those who make up the university support team for ISA’s should

learn what influences these athletes and why they decide to stay and leave. This project hopes to spell out for these actors what can be done to remedy these problems.

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