

On and Off the Court: A Comparative Analysis of Leadership Competencies between Domestic and International Student-Athletes

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Abstract

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offers athletes from diverse nationalities the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics. In fact, more than 24,000 international student-athletes currently compete in NCAA sponsored sports (NCAA, 2024). The increasing number of international athletes competing in NCAA sponsored sports has stimulated cultural development and led to economic benefits on university campuses across the United States (Belle et al., 2021). While the NCAA seeks to provide all student-athletes a holistic athletic and academic experience, the distinctive experiences of domestic and international student-athletes make the implementation of universally designed programming increasingly difficult.

One such area is in the development of meaningful leadership competencies. Student-athletes often develop leadership competencies through sport participation and interaction with teammates and coaches (Weight & Cote, 2003). College athlete leadership development is positively correlated to successful post-athletic transition, ability to lead others in the workplace, and increased self-efficacy (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Therefore, scholars have highlighted the need for leadership programming to assist student-athletes personal and professional development (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

While athletic departments offer athlete-specific development programming, many initiatives or personnel are tasked in academic services roles or, more recently, financial literacy development as pertaining to name, image, and likeness (NIL). Both of these programmatic implementations embody short-term athletic department objectives. Although beneficial in their own right, programming attributed to maintaining eligibility and monetizing NIL fail to empower student-athletes in the development of meaningful leadership competencies. While leadership development is an innate component of intercollegiate athletics participation (Weight & Cote, 2003), distinct programmatic initiatives to promote leadership are integral to the holistic development of student-athletes (Sabin et al., 2023).

Although domestic and international student-athletes alike face challenges matriculating to college, international athletes face unique stressors compared to their domestic peers (Jolly et al., 2022). While universities often offer programming to assist in various stages of college athletes' transitory periods (e.g., post-athletic), limited programming focuses on the unique transitions and lived-experiences of international athletes specifically (Newell, 2015). Considering that leadership development is positively correlated to numerous components aiding in student-athletes' successful post-athletic transition and professional competency (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021), examining the differences between the leadership competencies of domestic and international student-athletes may promote the development of meaningful programmatic initiatives of specific benefit to international athletes.

Using purposive sampling, student-athletes currently competing at NCAA member institutions were solicited to participate in the study. A questionnaire consisting of demographic questions and developed leadership scales (i.e., Leadership Learning Agility Scale [LLAS; Bouland-van Dam et al., 2022] and the

Student Leadership Behavior Scale [SLBS; Kimura et al., 2022]) was distributed to participants. While data collection remains ongoing, responses of nearly 236 current NCAA athletes (n = 200) provides researchers the opportunity to contextualize preliminary findings.

International athletes, comprising 15% of the total survey population to date, possess underdeveloped leadership competency when compared to their domestic athlete peers. Notably, the lack of leadership development programming available to international athletes specifically contributes to the gap in leadership competency. Whereas domestic athletes often derive and develop leadership competencies through NCAA mandated programming such as Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), international athlete participants in this study indicate they are less inclined to engage in such programmatic initiatives. Given the vast number of international athletes competing in NCAA sponsored sports and the NCAA's stated mission to cultivate an inclusive environment and promote holistic athlete development, the preliminary findings of this study indicate that the needs and development of international athletes may not be adequately addressed under the present operation of NCAA athletics. This presentation aims to discuss gaps between domestic and international college athlete development and actionable initiatives to stimulate the development of future programming to bridge this gap.