

# Pursuing the American Dream: A Qualitative Exploration of International Student-Athlete Who Remained in the United States Post-Graduation

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## Abstract

The experiences of international student-athletes who matriculate to the United States (US) has long been of interest to researchers (Popp et al., 2009; Ridpath et al., 2020). However, much of the literature has focused on international student-athletes' motivations for migrating to the US (Love & Kim, 2011), and international student-athletes' initial transition to American colleges and universities (Jolly et al., 2022). Limited work has been dedicated to exploring the decisions of international student-athletes to remain in the US upon graduation (Foster & Lally, 2021).

International students choose to remain in the US for political, economic, social, and personal reasons (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Altbach, 2004; Sage, 2010). Still, the decision to remain in the US is often affected by immigration policies (Han et al., 2015). Currently, more than 20,000 international student-athletes are competing at NCAA member institutions (NCAA, 2022). While some will return to their home countries upon graduation, many international student-athletes decide to remain in the US upon graduation. Informed by the Career Construction Theory (CCT), this study aimed to explore the career goals of international student-athletes and examine how these goals influenced the decision of this population to remain in the US after graduation.

The present study was qualitative in nature, using a phenomenological approach which explored the participants' lived experiences in a particular setting and built on the experiences of the participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using purposeful sampling, 13 former international student-athletes that presently live in the US participated in semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed using Saldana's (2009) two-cycle process. In total, three themes emerged from the data: (1) opportunities, (2) career influences, and (3) challenges and barriers to remaining in the US. Throughout the interviews, the participants spoke to the opportunities afforded to them due to intercollegiate sport participation; specifically, the ability to play a sport, gain an education, and explore the US workforce. Career influences included the impact of sport participation (e.g., time management, goal-oriented), the education this population received while studying in the US, and the role of parents in the decision to remain in the US. In the final theme, challenges and barriers to remaining in the US, the participants spoke to obstacles related to immigration.

Although the study findings are not generalizable, they are applicable to intentional student-athletes. The results provide insight into international student-athletes' unique experiences and challenges. The findings of the present study may assist US colleges and universities in better understanding and supporting the needs of international student-athletes, contributing to policies and practices that promote the success of this population. Lastly, the participants provided advice to other international student-athletes who wish to remain in the US (and gain employment) upon graduation.