

# “I Want to Continue Athletics and I Also Want to Study”: Exploring International Student Athletes’ Transition Experiences to the NAIA Affiliated Colleges

Kibaek Kim, Campbellsville University

## Abstract

There are over a million international students pursuing their degrees in U.S. higher education institutions (IIE, 2023). Among them are 25,000 international student-athletes (ISAs) who are enrolled in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) affiliated Universities (NCAA, 2023). Studies have been striving to foster and support this population’s successful transition to the U.S. (Newell, 2015; Stokowski et al., 2013). For instance, studies introduced the hardships the ISAs are experiencing, such as language barrier, homesickness, etc. (Meadows et al., 2011) and provided strategies to help them successfully transition to the U.S., such as getting social and interpersonal help from the college, coaches, etc. (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019). However, much of the literature (e.g., Jolly et al., 2022; Ridpath et al., 2019) has focused on the 25,000 ISAs enrolled at NCAA membership institutions, with a scarcity of studies available that deal with ISAs competing in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), although they are also one of the intercollegiate athletic associations that rivals the popularity with the NCAA. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore NAIA ISAs’ perceptions of adapting to life in the United States (US). The results of this study can help athletic departments and international student offices better understand and assist the ISA population in their successful transition to a new environment, and add to the ISA literature by providing a new case to less explored populations.

This study is based on the transition theory, which emphasizes the importance of characteristics of the transition and the individual, as well as one’s environments before and after the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). This study utilized focus group interviews (FGIs) with a semi-structured questionnaire asking ISAs about their transition experience to the U.S. based on the timeline, such as their athletic experience in their home country, their current experience in the U.S., and how they are preparing for their future. Through purposeful sampling, 11 ISAs at an NAIA institution participated in three FGIs, each focus group encompassing about three to four ISAs. This study adopted a content analysis method to analyze the participants’ responses (Elo et al., 2014).

The results of this study derived one to three themes in each timeline (before, during, and after the transition), totaling six themes. For instance, themes showed participants’ rationale for their choice of transition, hardships that they experienced during their transition to the U.S., such as the cultural differences in their daily lives (e.g., language barrier) and athletic environments (e.g., different play styles, lack of support from the coach), dependence on fellow ISAs who share the same mother tongue for social adjustment, and difficulties on getting a work visa. Based on the results of the study, the authors discussed the necessity for coaches to serve as a linking capital to a new society (Forbes-Mewett & Pape, 2019) and the NAIA institution’s role in ISAs’ cultural enrichment (Smith & Khawaja, 2014) and to provide working visa information sessions to overcome employment barriers (Calder et al., 2016).