Exploring the Effects of Demographic and Athletic Variables on the Retention of International Student-Athletes

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Socio-Cultural - Other (College Sport)
Poster
Session: Poster Session 1

Abstract 2021-049
Mode: Synchronous
Thursday June 3, 2021, 2:30 PM - 3:30 PM

International student-athletes (ISAs) competing in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) are a rapidly growing sub-group of the U.S. college student population (Foo et al., 2019; NCAA, 2020). In the past decade, the number of ISAs at all colleges has almost doubled to 18,000, with 13,000 participating at the Division I level (NCAA Country of Origin Dataset, 2020). Per a recent NCAA Research (2019) report, there were seven Division I sports in which ISAs accounted for more than 25% of the total student-athlete population. The growth of the ISA population suggests an increased emphasis on ISA recruiting by coaches, as well as an increased interest from ISAs to compete in NCAA athletics.

ISAs are an amalgamation of two distinct student groups: international students and student-athletes. From an international perspective, research has revealed that language, cultural barriers, and financial constraints are the most significant predictors of college retention (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Bista & Forster, 2011; Mamiseishvili, 2012). ISAs, however, are also student-athletes who face the same academic and sport challenges as domestic student-athletes. Retention studies on student-athletes reveal that several factors such as sport played (Le Crom et al., 2009), sport as an individual or team activity (Le Crom et al., 2009; Weiss & Robinson, 2013), scholarship type (Johnson et al., 2013a; Le Crom et al., 2009; Teich, 2016), coaching changes (Johnson et al., 2012; 2013a; 2013b), and team winning percentage (Johnson et al., 2012; 2013b; Popp et al., 2009) can influence attrition.

Although the research investigating these two unique groups exists, there is a scarcity of ISA-specific research. Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine whether athletic and demographic factors are able to predict the retention of ISAs in NCAA Division I-FBS athletics. The study examines eight variables (gender, location, language, sport, team/individual activity, scholarship level, coaching changes, and team winning percentage). The sample includes all Division I-FBS schools that are members of Power 5 conferences. ISAs who began their first season of competition from 2011-2012 to 2015-2016 were considered for this study to determine if they had completed four years of eligibility. Every year of competition by a student athlete is counted as a separate retention observation.

Currently, data collection is in-progress. Using Cultural Competency theory to frame the study, Pearson correlations and a least squares logistic regression analysis will explore two hypotheses. First, there will be significant relationships between the eight independent variables and the dependent variable of retention. Second, the regression will reveal variables that significantly predict ISA retention. Specifically, prior research suggests language proficiency (Andrade & Evans; 2009; Bentzinger, 2016) and coaching changes (Johnson et al., 2013b) are likely to be the most significant predictors of retention among ISAs. With an increasing number of ISAs participating in college sport, it is imperative that the NCAA and its member institutions find ways to better equip coaches and administrators to avoid attrition. Understanding the variables impacting the retention of ISAs will aid in the development of programming targeted specifically for this growing population.