

The transitioning process: A qualitative case study of international swimming and diving student-athletes competing in the NCAA

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Prior studies examining international student-athletes' transition experiences to life on American colleges campuses have generally focused on outcomes related to their recruiting experience and change adaptation. Few studies included the adjustment process and challenges faced by the individuals. The primary purpose of this case study was to add to the existing literature by expanding on the psychological transition process of international swimming and diving student-athletes experience after joining an American intercollegiate athletics team. Utilizing Bridges (1986) model, the present study employed semi-structured interviews amongst 10 international student-athletes from a large NCAA Division I university. A thematic analysis revealed seven major themes, which were: realization that change was necessary, reflecting on the decision, language barrier, education system, cultural adjustment and valuable lessons, international bond, and words of wisdom. The findings suggested transition is a multi-stage process that occurs throughout student-athletes' experiences on campus.

The amount of literature exploring student-athlete experiences has increased in recent years, with specific consideration given to international student-athletes. During 1991-1992, the National Collegiate Athletic

Association (NCAA) estimated around 6,833 international student-athletes competed at a NCAA institution with the number increasing to over 17,000 in 2015-2016 (DeHass, 2009; Pierce, Kaburakis, & Fielding, 2010; NCAA, 2017).

Many international student-athletes come from various countries that do not promote the merger of athletics and academics, which is in contrast to what takes place in the United States (Newell, 2015; Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009). In North America, the intercollegiate system is set up for academics and athletics to be fused together, whereas other countries treat both separately. The United States' approach to intercollegiate athletics attracts numerous international athletes who find the opportunity to earn a degree while furthering their education and receiving an athletic scholarship an appealing option (Foo, Wells, & Walker, 2015). This results in international students-athletes who must adapt to a new system of athletics, while also transitioning to life on American colleges campuses.

Scholars have addressed the transitioning process of international student-athletes from various perspectives highlighting different influences in comparison to domestic student-athletes. Some of these studies suggest that international student-athletes differ from their domestic counterparts, valuing positive academic experiences over competitive outcomes (Foo & Wells, 2011; Popp et al., 2009). Other research indicates international student-athletes have different intrinsic motivations as compared to domestic student-athletes (Stokowski, Huffman, & Aicher, 2013). Additionally, adjustment differences exist among both populations, as international student-athletes deal with unique issues such as language barriers (Sato, Hodge, & Burge-Hall, 2011)

and other social and academic concerns (Popp, 2008).

Few scholars (e.g. Meadows, Pierce, Popp, 2011; Newell, 2015; Popp, Love, Kim, & Hums, 2010; Popp, Pierce, & Meadows, 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000) suggested that international student-athletes have more unique experiences and challenges throughout their transitioning process compared to their domestic counterparts. Studies focused on international student-athletes' adjustment to life athletically, socially, and educationally at their new university. Ridinger and Pastore (2000) were the first scholars to assess international student-athletes' adjustment to college. Findings indicated international student-athletes adjusted significantly better to college in comparison to the general international student body. No significant differences were found between international and domestic student-athletes' adjustment; however, results have to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. Meadows et al. (2011) expanded that research and focused on international student-athletes' recruitment experiences and challenges faced at Division I institutions during their first year at college. The most challenging aspects of the transition process for international student-athletes was dealing with homesickness and adjusting to the new culture within the United States. Additionally, some scholars looked at transitions from the athlete's perspective; others used an academic approach to highlight the importance of advisors and different mentoring strategies to

successful aid international student-athletes throughout their adjustment period (Newell, 2015).

However, due to an increase in international student-athletes, there is a need to understand the psychological transition process from this population, yet, little is known about the three-stage transitioning process of international student-athletes within the intercollegiate athletics setting. Indeed, developing a better understanding of an international student-athletes' transitioning process could provide valuable insight regarding challenges and other noteworthy experiences. This could aid coaches, teammates, and administrators when forming relationships to assist in the transitioning process successfully. Thus, the intent of this study is to further extend the knowledge about the uniqueness of international student-athletes in terms of their perceptions of the experiences and challenges during their transition process.

Literature Review

Although used interchangeably at times in the literature, Bridges (2004) distinguished the terms *change* and *transition*. Change is a situational event that takes place at a particular time (Bridges, 1986), while transition is the "inner reorientation and self-redefinition people are exposed to when incorporating change into their life" (Bridges, 2004, p. xii). Notably, transition refers to a process of change through one's developmental life stages (Bridges, 2004). It demonstrates a three-part psychological process that involves

the adaptation of an individual towards a change event over time, progressing from one stage to the next (Bridges, 1986, 2004; Kralik, Visnetin, & Van Loon, 2005; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). This includes both a beginning and an end (Bridges, 2004; Elmberger, Bolund, & Lutzen, 2002; Fraser, 1999), transitioning to a new way of being (Bridges, 1986). According to Rousseau (1996), people do not change attitudes, values, or beliefs from one day to the next. Rather, it is a transitioning process in which individuals are confronted with various reactions such as anxiety, fear, excitement, or increased emotions.

Three Stages of Transition

Ending of past norms. The first stage of Bridges (2004) transition model, also known as the internal psychological view, is the recognition that past norms are no longer viable to the individual's new experience. In other words, the transition process can only start when the individual recognizes that a previous lived experience is coming to an end. Each individual develops his or her own response in order to end something. For international student-athletes, it might be the idea that training in the United States would suit their athletic career better. Additionally, those who consciously make a choice to change something tend to minimize the importance of finding a reason to end something and therefore experiencing a more positive transition process (Bridges, 2004).

Neutral zone. The second stage, neutral zone, is a combination of old and new experiences, which also signifies a confrontation with the unknown. It recognizes possible resistance behaviors and other positive reactions regarding the exposure of something new while going through a period of confusion and distress. Regardless of having reason or no reason to find an ending, individuals experience the second stage as the most confusing (Bridges, 2004). During this stage, the individual does not know what to expect or what the outcome could be.

Additionally, Bridges (1991) explained the emotional perspective and the ability of creating norms, values, and beliefs. Throughout this stage, the individual is confronted with something new. In order to surpass this stage, individuals have to develop additional coping skills to negotiate around in the “neutral zone” to get from one’s old life to the new one (Bridges, 2004).

New beginning. Lastly, stage three, new beginning, can only be experienced if one passed the previous two stages. As the individual continues to progress, the new beginning stage signifies the end of the transitioning process. Simultaneously, this stage represents a completed transition process, and when an individual is confronted with an ending again, one will embark on a new journey to go through these three stages.

Transitions have been explored in many contexts, including academic transitions. Andrade (2005) discussed the transitioning process domestic and in-

ternational students encounter during their first year at college and identified similar challenges. Both populations face adjustment to a new culture, being away from home, as well as the need to develop efficient study habits. However, language barriers and cultural differences added to the transition process of international students as other challenges, which can also disturb social transition. Furthermore, Abel (2002) noted international students might not be aware of the workload and time-consuming expectations of postsecondary education, which added further stress and challenges to overcome.

Transition Experiences of Domestic Student-Athletes

Various studies analyze various aspects of the transitioning out process of student-athletes adjusting to a life outside of sport (see Coakley, 2009; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016; Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013; Smith & Harding, 2018; Saxe, Hardin, Taylor, & Pate, 2017; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). Flowers and colleagues (2014) investigated the transition process of twelve male transfer student-athletes. Within their transition experience, individuals explained their main motivational focus to transfer was due to athletic reasons, not academically related. One major transition focus was the transfer shock, which researchers compared to a “cultural shock” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 8). Individuals had to go through a process of relearning expectations and

demands while being exposed to a new environment (Green, 2001; Laanan, 2004). Most studies focused on the overall adjustment of student-athletes, and more specifically, freshmen student-athletes. Scholars proposed one's freedom creates challenges to adapt to a more fast-paced academic and athletic environment, which could also hinder academic and social adjustment (Kearns, 1994; Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos, 2003). Regarding the transition process, student-athletes do face more unique challenges compared to the general student body as their role is not only being a student, but simultaneously being an athlete as well (Flowers et al., 2014). While not only getting familiar with college life and transitioning into a new environment, student-athletes face additional challenges such as training, traveling, competition, and media exposure (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000).

Transition Experiences of International Student-Athletes

The enrollment of international student-athletes at American colleges is not a recent trend (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000). Prior studies examining transition experiences of international student-athletes to life on American colleges campuses have generally focused on outcomes related to their change adaptation. Scholars focused on areas such as the recruitment experience and practices (Bale, 1991; Pierce, Popp, & Meadows, 2011), satisfaction (Trendafilova, Kim, & Hardin, 2010), the college selection process (Popp, Pierce,

& Hums, 2011), motivational factors to participate in intercollegiate athletics (Jones, Koo, Kim, Andrew, & Hardin, 2008; Stokowski et al., 2013), purpose of participation (Popp et al., 2009), adjustment issues (Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2010; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000), and coaching an international athlete (Baghurst et al., 2018). Scholars specifically examined the recruitment process compared to domestic student-athletes, analyzing various factors that influence one's decision-making that differs from international to domestic student-athletes.

Recruitment. Extensive studies compared and analyzed the recruitment experiences of international and domestic student-athletes (Bale, 1991; Gabert, Hale, & Montvalo, 1999; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman, 2001; Letawsky, Schneider, Pederson, Palmer, 2003; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2011). Researchers identified factors that influence the selection process of colleges for international-student athletes compared to domestic student-athletes (Popp et al., 2011). One sport-related component that was a crucial element in the decision-making process for domestic student-athletes was coaches (Paskus & Bell, 2016). Domestic student-athletes value their head coach's personality and identify him/her as important support throughout the process of selecting a college. Popp et al. (2011) found the most important factor for international student-athletes to choose a school was receiving an athletic

scholarship; however, the importance of the coach's personality is a new finding (Gabert et al., 1999; Goss et al., 2006; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Letawsky et al., 2003). Furthermore, for domestic student-athletes academic and social expectations were additional factors that influenced the college decision (Klenosky et al., 2001), while academic reputation of faculty members, location of college, availability of degree programs, and career opportunities were also factors identified that contributed to school choices amongst freshmen student-athletes (Andrew, Martinez, & Flavell, 2016). Additionally, research has focused on other aspects related to the recruitment experiences such as satisfaction and adjustment processes which have provided further insight into the lived experiences of international student-athletes.

Satisfaction and adjustment.

Scholars examined international student-athletes' satisfaction (Trendafilova et al., 2010) and adjustment issues (Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2010; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000). Trendafilova et al. (2010) investigated the levels of satisfaction of international student-athletes. Results revealed that the participants from a NCAA Division I school were satisfied regarding academic support services, athletically, and socially. Ridinger and Pastore (2000) were the first to discover that international student-athletes adjust significantly better to college life compared to domestic teammates and the general student body. The study was conducted at a large Midwest-

ern university and out of 80 participants, 16 identified as international student-athletes. The results demonstrated international student-athletes were better adjusted than the regular international student body, had higher mean scores on the academic adjustment scale, and had fewer issues with social adjustment. These findings led the authors to create a model of adjustment for that population. Building on this study, Meadows et al. (2011) extended the research to focus on the most significant challenges international student-athletes experience during their freshmen year of college. The sample consisted of 355 student-athletes from 15 different NCAA Division I colleges, while 192 participants identified as international. Findings exposed the three leading issues, such as homesickness, cultural adjustments, and overcoming language barriers, which led to an increased usage of administrative support. Furthermore, the authors suggested the need to improve the personal and social adjustment of international student-athletes.

Connections among Ridinger and Pastore (2000), Meadows et al. (2011), and Newell (2015) include the increased focus of improving social and personal adjustments in addition to acknowledging academic support services tailored towards international student-athletes. Although these findings provide information about transition outcomes and address adjustment issues, uncovering the psychological transition process undergone by the individual and how those challenges are experienced, and eventu-

ally overcome, extends the literature. To address this issue, the following research questions were explored:

RQ1: What were the student-athletes' experiences with the transitioning process?

RQ2: What type of challenges did the student-athlete face throughout the process?

RQ3: How would the student-athlete describe the change experience?

Methods

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions regarding the transition process for international student-athletes from a large university in the Southeastern United States when coming to a new environment. An instrumental case study design was employed, focusing on the discovery and interpretation of a unique case (Merriam, 2009). This study adopted an inductive, qualitative design guided by phenomenology (Patton, 2015). Thus, this approach; "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The value of phenomenology demonstrates the importance and priority to focus on how human beings experience and perceive the world through their lived experience (Adams & Van Manen, 2008; Patton, 2015).

Additionally, utilizing a phenomenology approach focuses on gaining a

deeper understanding of the meaning or nature of one's everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Thus, a phenomenological study "focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 2015, p. 117). To reflect on these research assumptions, this design was adopted to summarize raw data and to form strong connections between objectives and related summary findings (Thomas, 2006). A constructivist approach was utilized in the study as the main focus was directed towards the understanding of the personal meaning given behind an individual's transitioning process, while also analyzing the social context (Patton, 2015). Therefore, no conceptual or theoretical frameworks were contemplated before data collection because it may weaken the extensive lived experiences of individuals and may cause important findings not to suit this framework (Thomas, 2006).

Participants. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited after talking to their head coach and attending a practice. Purposeful sampling allows for the identification of individuals who are illuminative, meaning they offer insightful and valuable information regarding the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2015). A strategy of comparison-focused sampling was implemented to ensure information-rich individuals that could add critical elements to the overall findings. Thus, allowing to compare and contrast the participants' individual transitioning

process and to identify similarities and differences (Patton, 2015).

To ensure participants had adequate experience regarding the studied phenomenon, emails were only sent to international student-athletes at a large, public and flagship, NCAA Division I university in the southern region of the United States, who had experienced a transitioning process. Before data collection began through face-to-face interviews, informed consent was obtained. A total of 10 participants were recruited, four female and six male at the end of the 2017 fall semester. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 21, with an average of 20. Five participants indicated that English was their first language, whereas the other five acquired English as a second language. Demographics of the sample are listed in Table 1.

Framework

Data were collected using standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 2015), which allowed participants to discuss stories and lived experiences. The particular wording and sequence of questions were set up in advance. Questions were worded in an open-ended format. Analysis of this method facilitated making responses easy to find and compare. Because participants answered the same questions, it increased the comparability of responses on all topics addressed. Questions included 'how did you feel knowing you would leave your familiar environment?', 'Was there a point in time where you questioned your deci-

Table 1

<i>Participant Demographics</i>	
Variable	<i>n</i>
Gender	
Female	4
Male	6
Athletic Experience	
Senior	3
Junior	1
Sophomore	3
Freshmen	3
Nationality	
Brazil	1
Canada	1
Croatia	1
Estonia	1
Great Britain	3
Italy	1
New Zealand	1
Switzerland	1
Age	
18	1
19	3
20	1
21	5

sion? Why or why not?', 'How would you describe your overall transitioning experience?'. The one-round interviews ranged from 17 to 33 minutes. For the purpose of anonymity, participants received pseudonyms.

Data analysis. To refer back to the paradigmatic assumptions underlying this research, an inductive analysis approach was first used. Inductive analysis, as described by Thomas (2006), portrays a systematic process of taking raw data and condensing it into smaller summa-

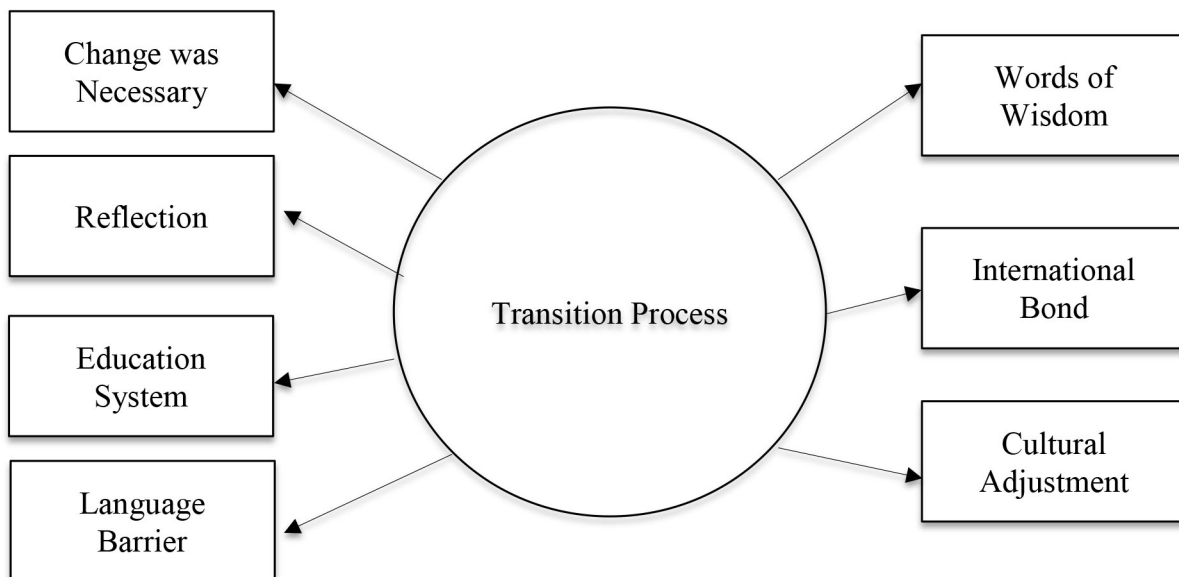
ries, in short, to analyze qualitative data. Data analysis began with the process of identifying specific cases, which were generated into more general patterns. This eventually led to a cross-case analysis and the discovery of common themes throughout (Patton, 2015). Overall, this approach underlined the ability to interpret emerging themes beyond the described data and provided an opportunity to theorize about the gathered data, which then led to the application of Bridges (1986) three-stage transition model (Bridges, 1986; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016).

Braun et al. (2016) proposed a six-stage guide to analyze the collected data. The process began with the immersion into the data, which transpired through the conduction, transcription, and reading of interviews. During the second stage, generating initial codes, data was

organized to start initial open coding procedures on the transcripts, which lead to the creation of various initial categories and themes via inductive analysis. Next, a broader approach was taken to search for themes and combine initially established codes to create a foundation regarding future themes. Also, this allowed checking for primary themes and key words in the data. Furthermore, stage four allowed to review primary themes. This involved examining the analyzed and organized data and investigating to what extent this would aid in the process of telling a clear and rich story. Therefore, categories were combined to create stronger themes to add more depth to the overall content. Figure 1 described the levels of themes with subthemes to ensure coherence and to demonstrate how each theme worked well with the overall objective of the project. Stage five

Figure 1

Reviewing themes



elaborated on defining themes as well as renaming them. Writing the report was the last stage in the analysis process. It was emphasized to provide a clear interpretation of the data and to offer a logical and precise report. In addition, after conducting an inductive analysis, it led the research to explore a deductive analysis because comparisons from emerging themes were applicable to Bridges (1986) three-stage transition model.

Data credibility. Member checks were completed to establish trustworthiness (Carlson, 2010; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member-checking is an important step to validate the collected data (Jones & Gratton, 2015). Emails with verbatim transcripts were sent to all participants to ask for review and verification of what has been recorded, ensuring the accuracy of the transcribed data (Andrews, Pederson, & McEvoy, 2011). Also, previously made comments were summarized during the interviews to provide a correct understanding by the researchers.

Findings

Seven key themes were revealed within the responses from the participants (see Figure 1). Their transition reflected a psychological three-stage process, identifying an ongoing process. The findings of this study would suggest that the application of Bridges' (1986) three-stage transition model applies to the understanding of how international student-athletes students conceptualize their transition process. Table 2 offers an overview of how the themes fit with Bridges model. The following section presents the seven created themes that will address the previously established research questions.

Realization Change was Necessary

The reason for international student-athletes to come to the United States is embedded in the realization that the ability to combine athletics with academics is an opportunity one should not pass up on. Either the athletic aspect and/or the educational opportunities

Table 2

Themes based on Bridges (1986) Three-Stage Transition Model

Stage	Theme
1. Ending	Change was necessary
2. Neutral Zone	Reflecting on the Decision
	Language Barrier
	Education System
	Cultural Adjustment/Valuable Lessons
	International Bond
3. New Beginning	Words of Wisdom

in combination with athletic advancement motivate individuals to embark on a transition process. Therefore, some participants expressed a higher emphasis on the athletic portion, whereas others expressed receiving an education as more important. Female ISA1 stated: "It's just such a big opportunity that I knew I couldn't give that up especially when my goal was going to the Olympics, and I have to do everything I can to get there." Male ISA10 pointed out that the system in the United States allows combining academics with athletics: "There is like no sports school, sports school system at home. So yeah it was pretty much my only option to come to the US." Focusing on athletic advancements and opportunities, one has not been given at home allows individuals to create a more positive outlook. However, this also demonstrates the emphasis placed on athletics rather than focusing on education.

Reflecting on the Decision

Another theme that emerged through the interviews identified how student-athletes acknowledged the potential challenges one might face when engaging in a transitioning process. Furthermore, some also engaged in reflecting on the decision of coming to the United States. Expectations differ, and individuals experience differing emotions when facing transitions. Some admitted how there could be good and bad days, which ultimately leads someone to re-analyze one's initial decision. For example, male ISA3 explained: "Sometimes I do question it,

especially if I am in a bad mood. Sometimes I think did I make the right choice? But then I look around the school is just so amazing so I made the right decision." Furthermore, female ISA1 underlined: "There was no point in time that I wanted to go home. There were hard times where I did question it, but my diving got better, and it's an opportunity that you cannot pass up on."

Moreover, some also came to the understanding that the initial goal is what drove the change process in the first place and therefore it was the right decision, regardless of any hardship that would come their way. The importance placed upon experiencing a new culture, meeting new people, and in general, having this opportunity was reflected in each of the participants' interviews.

Language Barrier

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews identified how language barrier played a role, not only for those who acquired English as their second language, but also for those who speak English as their mother tongue. This barrier emerged not only in the classroom, but also when it came to interactions with teammates. Five out of ten participants indicated that English was their first language. However, they also acknowledged experiencing language barriers.

For native speakers, language barrier came as a surprise. It affected the interaction between teammates because people assumed native speakers already

knew the language; therefore, they do not require further explanations. However, they need just as much support as to those who do not speak English as their first language. Female ISA6 explained: “Sometimes it’s easier to understand other internationals than it is for them to understand me. They simplify things, but with me, they don’t because we speak the same language. Like hang on, I still don’t know what that means.” Adding to this, male ISA3 said: “The worst thing is when I write in English they correct me. I am like no, I am right; you changed it. They [Americans] don’t treat it as two ways; they treat it as they are always right.”

However, an important point was made that expressed frustration from native speakers. Male ISA3 realized: “When you are English, they presume you know. I never logged onto [our online course management system] because I didn’t know what it was like no one ever told me to do it. You all just know because you are American.” This strongly emphasizes the gap between Americans and another group of individuals who also speak English as a native language. One has to think about the difference in culture in addition to a completely new system that further promotes the gap and therefore leaves people outside of the United States at a disadvantage.

Education System

Each student-athlete in the sample referred to having difficulties understanding the educational system in the

United States. For example, female ISA1 stated: “I didn’t know what was going on. I would say the biggest shock was going straight into university and then the busy schedule with swimming and diving.” Male ISA10 described the first semester as the most challenging: “I would say the first semester was that adaption and adjustment period.” Differences arose between individuals who just finished school back home in comparison to others who had been out of school for longer and had to get used to taking classes and completing homework.

Because the education systems in the home country of the student-athletes in this sample are different, learning a new education system affected their transitioning process and added stress to the overall process. Individuals expressed concerns that left them struggling to go through the process, and it was clear their previous expectations did not incorporate adjusting to school. However, male ISA5 pointed out: “There was no way I would be able to get that kind of education, especially back home.”

Cultural Adjustment and Valuable Lessons

Going through a transition process leaves traces that ultimately influence one’s life. Especially moving to a new country not only exposes one to a new culture, but the transitioning process itself exposed individuals to learning curves. Male ISA10 addressed a significant cultural adjustment that was the opposite of what the individual was

used to from home: “There were a lot of cultural differences. I am like really closed up, like people like me and from my culture, we don’t do small talk stuff like that. So I for sure got more open over here and doing that and talking with people.” Experiencing new cultures and different perspectives help to build one’s understanding of the world as well as being exposed to personal growth. As ISA1 acknowledged: “It put me into a position where I am much more knowledgeable on that experience, diving, and school and I thinking without the hard times I wouldn’t be where I am now. Although I have made some mistakes and everything like that I have grown from it.” Additionally, one has to actually experience what a transitioning process feels like. Despite receiving information from others, one can only develop a comprehensive understanding when a transition is experienced first hand. Male ISA2 explained: “No matter like how much advice you get off of somebody you cannot understand the concept. You can’t grasp how loud the [conference] championships are; you can’t grasp how different the education system is.” Also, male ISA8 described the challenges experienced when talking to coaches: “I just had issues with the coaches here because they thought I was thinking too much of myself and like uh just you know like I was always sent home. I think it happened two or three times where I would just ask why and they would be like alright get out and if you don’t believe this then just get out,

and I was like no I’m just asking what is this for.”

Some identified how their transitioning process was still ongoing, and described it as a continuous process. This demonstrates that there is not a clear cut off for when the transitioning process is fully completed. Female ISA6 described: “I am still learning everyday and I need more time to adjust. I learn something different about [our state] or swimming in America or school or anything like that.”

International Bond

Another key theme that emerged underlined the close support system of teammates, especially fellow international student-athletes, but also from coaches who ultimately became a second family. This was an area that added to the transition process because participants felt differing connections between domestic and other international student-athletes. On the surface, everyone gets along, and there is equal acceptance between both domestic and international student-athletes. As commented on by female ISA6: “As internationals, we have a bond because we are all in the same boat which we all get a long really well, but the whole team, in general, is just very close. Um so I think the internationals have a special type of bond, they were definitely the people that I went to at the beginning because they understood a lot more.”

Different dynamics are also experienced as male ISA3 explained: “It’s true

the internationals stick more together. I personally think internationals work harder in the pool. Maybe it's just because all the internationals are like faster and I guess you wouldn't recruit someone from a different country if they are slow." One significant difference in the perception of domestic versus internationals described by male ISA4 was: "We are more like I have to do that and I have to succeed. They are more open-minded like they think they can also do something else." This hints at differences in cultures, which also demonstrates how domestic student-athletes do not have the same experiences and tend to take things for granted. Based on these statements, one can identify that the commitment of domestic student-athletes is not as big as from international student-athlete who commit to undergoing a big transition.

Words of Wisdom

The last key theme emerging through interviews summarized the individual's perspectives on embarking on the transitioning process while reflecting on their experiences. Specifically, upperclassmen quotes were chosen as their intercollegiate career came to an end. With the perception of having completed their transition process, individuals were able to offer suggestions as they were confronted with a new beginning as for upperclassmen their initial transition process came to an end while a new one began to understand how to transition out of sport. Yet, it has to be noted that few lowerclassmen

also perceived to have successfully completed their transition process. Attitudes revealed positive outlooks while simultaneously realizing that it took time and determination to successfully go through the transition process. Even though one can argue there are various influences, in the end, it is the individual's choice to take that leap of faith and join a new environment, not knowing what to expect. Advice was given on various levels, as expressed by female ISA1: "Listen to yourself and don't listen to your parents. I mean listen to them, but don't allow them to make your decision because at the end of the day you are going through the four, five years and they aren't." Female ISA9 also highlighted the benefits and the positives of moving somewhere new: "To really live somewhere where you weren't born I think that is something really special and cool [because] it's not just traveling anymore. It's like actually living there and experiencing it and like embracing like a new culture." Another part of taking into consideration is to venture outside of your comfort zone to try and gain new experiences and creating other relationships as stated by male ISA8: "Definitely spread your wings don't stay uh just focusing on the sport part of it. Try to get like have as much experiences as you can uh meet people from outside of athletics."

However, one strong statement pointed out to never neglect one's own roots throughout this process, regardless of how challenging it has been. Male ISA3 mentioned: "Don't lose what you have

because there are so many Americans, so as much as it's like adopting a new culture, your culture should always be first." Additionally, the same student-athlete emphasized how holding on to one's original culture creates meaning, not only for the individual personally, but also for his/her surroundings: "Because that's what makes you special and it advances you as well sometimes." Table 3 provides additional examples of statements within each theme.

Discussion

The overall perception of the transitioning process from participants in

this study was positive, yet challenging. Similar to previous research from Meadows et al. (2011), international student-athletes in this sample identified language barriers, adjusting to the culture, and education as challenges they had to overcome. However, in contrast to Meadows et al.'s (2011) results, homesickness was not a major key finding that created difficulties in the transitioning process, and language barriers were also highlighted from native speakers. Furthermore, additional themes were identified, such as realizing that change was necessary and how developing a bond with other international student-athletes

Table 3

Themes based on Bridges (1986) Three-Stage Transition Model

Stage	Theme	Example
1. Ending	Change was necessary	"The sport system over here is just so much better than at home."
2. Neutral Zone	Reflecting on the Decision	"It was a challenge, but I enjoyed it because it was new things, new people, new place."
	Language Barrier	"England and America speak the same language, so you never think that there is gonna be an issues in terms of like language barriers, but there is an issue."
	Education System	"I didn't know what a GPA was, and no one bothered to tell me."
	Cultural Adjustment/Valuable Lessons	"Took a lot of time to adjust, a lot of time."
	International Bond	"The coaches and teammates are like a family."
3. New Beginning	Words of Wisdom	"What's stopping you? It's four years, if you don't want to stay after that you don't have to."

aided in the transitioning process. This was also a finding in Pierce et al.'s (2011) study that highlighted a strong support system was necessary for international student-athletes to have a successful transitioning process. The findings of the current study relate to the elements found in Bridges (1986) transition model. This model applies to the entirety of the individual's intercollegiate career. However, individuals demonstrated different perceptions about their transition process. Furthermore, these findings indicate international student-athletes adapt to these critical challenges over time by going through each stage of Bridges (1986) model.

Ending

Realization that change was necessary. Depending on the background of the individual, the emphasis was placed primarily on athletics or academics that led to the transition process in the first place. As described by Rothwell et al. (1995), accomplishing a goal can be a catalyst to embark on a change and transition process. Due to the individual's realization that change was necessary to reach an advanced stage regarding their athletic or academic success, individuals expressed their desire to do so. Rather than facing issues in those two areas, individuals experienced a great transitioning process that affected variable levels and stages in one's life. At the same time, this meant a conscious movement towards a new version of oneself (Kralik et al., 2006). The first stage, letting go,

was passed as the idea emerged of joining the intercollegiate athletics program in the United States. It became clear to the individual that change was necessary in order to continue one's academic/athletic career.

Important items to note from the realization that international student-athletes needed a change could stem from either focusing on developing further skills, while also having the opportunity of receiving an education while continuing one's sport. Practical implications for coaches, especially during the recruitment phase, should be geared towards an understanding of the individual athlete and their goals. Transparency is a major key as international student-athletes not only value a scholarship, but also the head coach's personality (Goss et al., 2006; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Popp et al., 2011).

Neutral Zone

Reflecting on the decision. Another theme emerged that elaborated on potential regrets of leaving one's home country, stage two was identified due to a great deal of the unknown that laid ahead. Making this type of commitment left individuals feeling various emotions such as fear, excitement, and anxiety (Bridges, 1991). The individual became more familiar with new expectations after going through a phase of the unknown. Lastly, as the move was completed, and one began to settle in, the transitioning process for this specific theme ended due to new beginnings on the horizon. Prac-

tical implications for coaches would be to offer support for international student-athletes, being involved, and asking questions regarding the international student-athletes adjustment.

Language barrier. As mentioned previously, native speakers had difficulties understanding domestic student-athletes, coaches, and administrators, even though the groups involved spoke the same language. Andrade (2005) found language barriers and the adjustment to the education system for international students to be more challenging than for domestic students. An interesting finding from this study provided insight into the experienced language barrier from a native speakers' perspective. Even though native speakers do not have to learn and speak a second language, it still proved to be challenging to communicate. This was especially surprising for the native speakers, but expected from others who picked up English as a secondary language. Examples were mentioned that included not knowing what a GPA was, how and when to register for classes, and why it was necessary to check the school's primary online learning management system website to receive information about classes. Domestic speakers assumed there was no need to explain further a concept to a native speaker based on the assumption that they speak the same language when, in reality, it was the opposite. For athletic, academic advisers, this is an important topic as additional attention is needed to ensure success in the classroom and overall understanding of the

American education system. This, however, does not only apply for those who acquired English as a second language, but also for native speakers coming from a different country. As for coaches and domestic teammates, it is crucial to provide more explanation of training expectations.

Cultural adjustment and valuable lessons. Additionally, understanding the education system in the United States takes time, especially in combination with learning rules and regulations about the NCAA. Even with explanations, international student-athletes had to learn as they went by because it is a new schooling approach they have not experienced in this type of magnitude before in combination with athletics. As Abel (2002) demonstrated, international students tend to underestimate the amount of workload they were exposed to, which was also found in this study. Various individuals expressed the idea of taking previous classes again or getting back into the habit of studying and doing homework. It took some individuals at least one semester to get used to the demands, whereas others also expressed that it was more challenging than expected. Few just came out of high school, and others had a break from school work for a few years which made it more difficult to get into a routine of attending classes and focusing on grades to continue to stay enrolled and eligible.

Culture is the complex of shared perceptions by all in-group members, which may affect their thoughts, be-

haviors, and attitudes (Triandis, 1989). Additionally, cultural differences can be experienced not only in different countries, but also in various societies (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, & Wang, 2010). For example, characteristics such as individualism and collectivism vary depending on eastern or western societies. More specifically, individualistic cultures reflect on an independent self-concept, whereas collectivist societies priorities the group rather than the individual (Behfar, Kern, & Brett, 2006). "It is impossible ever to completely separate the environment from the person observing it" (Bowers, 1973, p. 328), while Han, Mahony, and Greenwell (2016) pointed out people's characteristics within the same cultural environment can be profoundly different from others. Previous research identified cultures from Asia, Central/South America, and Africa to be collectivist (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). As experienced by individuals in this study, their culture back home had other values than in the United States, which allowed them to experience a different side and enabled them to become more open.

Similarities were also drawn in regards to practice and familiarizing oneself with swimming pools measured by yards as opposed to meters, how coaches were approaching student-athletes during practice, and how to make sense of the different competition levels at swim meets. Some came from a small training group and had the ability to create a close relationship with their coach, which made it a process to get acclimated to

a larger training group. Building close relationships with a coach were related to the culture in one's home country, which was an adjustment as to how things were addressed in the United States. For example, one individual pointed out that asking coaches back home about certain sets was normal due to curiosity, whereas here it was deemed as disrespectful and led the swimmer to be sent home on various occasions without the individual understanding why the coaches thought it was disrespectful behavior.

Not only are international student-athletes confronted with cultural differences, but coaches are as well. Keeping an open mind and understanding that each culture is different will allow coaches to develop the ability to approach recruits from out of the country with more empathy.

International bond. A previous study conducted by Pierce et al. (2011) indicated the importance of a strong support system, which was part of a successful transitioning process. The findings in this study underlined how the participants valued the fact that other international student-athletes who are also far away from home are going through the same experience. This allows them to relate to one another and form an immediate bond. Regardless of where the other person was from the same country or somewhere else, participants identified an immediate connection with fellow internationals on the team. Some mentioned they formed the closest friendships with other internationals and

decided to live together, but also pointed out that everyone is equally accepted, regardless of one's background. One interesting finding from the results shed light on differing attitudes and willingness to participate in practice. For most participants in this study, the main reason to come to the United States was for their athletic career, and they were shocked to realize that not everyone on the team had the same opinion and value system. There is a perception from the participants from the current study that international student-athletes try harder in comparison to domestic student-athletes. Some observed that in their opinion, domestic student-athletes are not as serious about the opportunities that have been given to them, which also ties back with being exposed to a different culture and adjusting to new expectations, values, and norms.

Regarding Bridges (1986) transition model, reflecting on the decision, language barriers, the education system, cultural adjustment, and international bond passed the first and second stage. However, the last stage is only going to be completed once the individual has successfully gone through the previous two. As the results from the interviews highlighted, international student-athletes learn something new every day, which can be a word or a phrase, it can be related to the overall education, or in combination with culture. Furthermore, some individuals suggested their transitioning process is still ongoing due to the fact of

being exposed to ideas and concepts that are unfamiliar.

New Beginning

Words of wisdom. At the end of each interview, the participants offered some advice for future international student-athletes identified as words of wisdom. Their advice varied from ensuring to conduct research about schools well in advance, going on recruiting trips, trusting the process, and embarking on a new journey. Some individuals were able to talk to previous friends or teammates who have gone through this transitioning process and received ideas on what to expect. This opportunity was also discussed in other studies (Pierce et al., 2011). Others were on their own, and even though they voiced concerns about the unknown, they had a positive outlook and made it work, which it ultimately added tremendous value to one's life experience. However, based on the individual and where he/she was in the transition process, some have completed the previous two stages, whereas others were still going through the process. Those who completed the transition process (for example upper classmen) were able to offer more insightful advice because they have adjusted in comparison to those who are still changing, more specifically first-year student-athlete.

Focusing on the description of the transitioning process, individuals analyzed that change was necessary in their situation, and the idea of coming

to the United States seemed to be the best solution. The results indicated how individuals appreciated the opportunity that has been given to them and wanting to make the most of it. Even though ups and downs were discussed, valuable lessons were taken from going through this experience. Furthermore, a transitioning process requires time and individuals indicated experiencing a learning process. This learning process reflected not only understanding how practice was run or how to navigate around campus and classes, but also needing more time in general. The results indicated how individuals did not know what effect the transitioning process had. Rousseau (1996) implied change could not be implemented at once, and most of the time, one cannot predict and foresee the full scope of its outcome. Therefore, one cannot clearly define how long a transition process lasts, and each individual responds differently.

The participants in this study represented different classes. It was common for upperclassmen to describe their transition process as completed while their intercollegiate career came to an end. Interestingly, few lowerclassmen perceived they also completed their transition process.

Limitations

While we believe the current study extends the literature in regards to international student-athletes and their transitioning process, it does have certain limitations. One limitation was the small

number of participants used in the sample. The present study sought responses from all ISAs within a single sports team. Therefore, the sample selection was limited to the available percentages of classification (i.e., freshman, sophomore, etc.) and gender. While the sample size was adequate for the type of qualitative analysis used in the study, it does limit the ability to generalize. There are thousands of international student-athletes competing in various sports from numerous different countries. Additionally, all participants attended the same NCAA school and represented the same sport.

Utilizing a quantitative approach could allow for a higher response rate as a larger population from different sports and institutions could be recruited. Not only could this increase our understanding from an academic perspective, but this could also allow coaches and athletic administrators to gain a more in-depth understanding of the potential challenges faced by international student-athletes when transitioning.

Future Research

In future research designs, sample recruitment should include coaches and international student-athletes from other sports. Conducting in-depth interviews with those individuals would allow to examine the difference coaches observe and how they approach aiding international student-athletes in the process. Incorporating this point of view allows opportunities for coaches as well as athletic administrators to develop a better

understanding of the challenges and issues previously addressed. More specifically, one would identify the coach's knowledge about their impact on the transitioning process and if they are aware of the demands and attention international student-athletes expect to receive. Additionally, future students could focus on data collection from various points of the transition process, such as a longitudinal approach that follows ISAs throughout their college career. While this was beyond the scope of the present study, future research on the entire process would be fruitful. Another research avenue could specifically focus on the information transmitted to the international student-athlete before committing to an institution, while also conducting follow-ups to investigate how true those promises have been.

Conclusion

Previous studies have examined the out-of-sport transition process of student-athletes, addressing various key aspects ranging from career, to skill development, re-socialization, and losing one's student-athlete identity. For instance, Flowers et al. (2014) focused on the transition process of male student-athletes transferring to a new school and athletic program, yet the gap existed in understanding the transition process of international student-athletes coming to the United States.

The present study addressed the psychological transition process international student-athletes face when coming

to the United States to embark on a new athletic and academic experience. Despite these challenges, the participants acknowledged their opportunity and did not regret their decision of coming to the United States. Some underestimated the amount of change and time it required an individual to invest in the transitioning process, which Rousseau (1996) pointed out to be impossible to know beforehand. However, realizing the opportunities that stem from this, the decision left individuals acknowledging the type of unique influences it had on their lives. Having the ability to meet new people, learning, seeing, and experiencing new cultures adds to personal value. It is an experience no one can take away from the individual, and it is something one has to experience for themselves to truly understand its magnitude. The outline of each theme was applicable to Bridges (1986) three-stage transition model, highlighting the transitioning process to continue throughout the duration of the international student-athletes' stay at college.

The current paper extends previous knowledge regarding the unique experiences and challenges international student-athletes are confronted with. Specific findings outlined the importance of forming an international bond and pointed out the need to acknowledge native speakers' difficulties with certain expressions and expectations. Developing a better understanding in this area could provide valuable insights regarding challenges and other noteworthy experiences

that would allow coaches, athletic advisors, and domestic teammates to be more aware about their own behavior. Additionally, instead of continuing to focus on support services and outcomes that could aid individuals from administrative perspectives, these results provided further insight into how immediate surroundings (team and coaches) impact the transitioning process to raise awareness. As found in a previous study, only one-fourth of international student-athletes in the study were using administrative support services throughout their transitioning process (Meadows et al., 2011). Lastly, these results indicated that a transition process is not simply completed by moving and starting a new journey, but it also creates awareness and underlines once again why student-athletes, and in this case international student-athletes, are a unique population.

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Appendix 1

Representative Quotes Regarding Transition Experiences

Realization Change was Necessary

“It’s like a more competitive atmosphere than in Canada so they [girls above me in high school] started doing it and that kind of put the idea in my head that I just followed.” (ISA9)

“The sport system over here is just so much better than at home.” (ISA3)

“There was no way I would be able to get that kind of education especially back home.” (ISA5)

“I’m here with the awareness that I can do what I have always wanted to do and I can grow. You have to work hard, be determined, and persistent. Here, the doors are to be throw open to a lot of opportunities, but you need to stay focus and don’t forget about why you want to come here, never!” (ISA7)

Reflecting on the Decision

“When I like committed I was for sure set on going and I had no doubt in my mind I wanted to be here.” (ISA2)

“I thought it was a positive challenge. It wasn’t an uncomfortable challenge. It was a challenge, but I enjoyed it because it was new things, new people, new place.” (ISA3)

“When you know why you do it and you that know it’s gonna be hard time but a time that is worth for the effort, you are just willing to do that and make the best out of it.” (ISA4)

“This year I am so happy because it’s like I can really look back and be proud of what I have done, but there is definitely that part in the middle where you are like what’s going to happen, do I want to go home, or like where do I want to go when I am done.” (ISA9)

Language Barrier

“England and America speak the same language so you never think that there is gonna be an issues in terms of like language barriers, but there is an issue.” (ISA6)

“When I first got here I lived with three Americans, which was though, but it was good for me because I was learning English like the proper way. So I was always put up to the challenge.” (ISA8)

Education System

“I thought when I was 16 and done my GSEs I was done with that forever and having to do those classes all over again, that was a big challenge. It was hard to wrap my head around that.” (ISA2)

“I didn’t know what a GPA was and no one bothered to tell me.” (ISA3)

“Being thrown into 16 hours a week, you have to do English again and math. I mean the first month and a half I had a breakdown every night because I thought I was failing, which I was. American schooling, I literally had to learn it as we go by.” (ISA6)

“Adjusting to the college system, it’s definitely different like the way classes work. You know you don’t have classes as much but it’s definitely harder. Probably took me a semester or two to like get used to like studying harder cuz like it’s different than high school. So I was studying harder.” (ISA9)

Cultural Adjustment and Valuable Lessons

“Took a lot of time to adjust, a lot of time. Especially in my first semester my freshmen year, it was a big learning curve and learning stage.” (ISA2)

“Don’t regret anything because like you don’t know, this is one of the best things. It just opens up your eyes so much more.” (ISA6)

“I definitely say this year has been a huge learning process to me about who I am just cuz I made new friends and I met totally different group of people outside of athletics, which is like to me was one of the best things that happened to me.” (ISA8)

International Bond

“Teammates you know they become your close friends, or closest friends because you spend all day with them, you do everything with them and you can tell if someone is uh feeling down or needs some support.” (ISA2)

“American people are more like that step wasn’t that big and yeah when I don’t succeed in this one I will just change to something else.” (ISA4)

“I was very nervous because I used to train in a group of six so that was very different and now I got 56.” (ISA6)

“The coaches and teammates are like a family.” (ISA7)

“There are a lot of international guys on the team when I got here so they always understand everything that I went through and they always helped me with that. I guess my best friends are all internationals. I live in a house with five internationals uh so uh we definitely help each other a lot.” (ISA8)

“I think we kind of like bond over that a bit and that is always nice, even if it is not spending a lot of time together, you kind of always feel close to like people who understand what it feels like to not be in your home country.” (ISA9)

“There is one guy who is pretty similar to me and I wouldn’t say that I have changed too much because right now I live with guys who are all internationals and who are similar to me.” (ISA10)

Words of Wisdom

“It’s worth in the end, it’s only four years of your long life.” (ISA1)

“Change is always good. The change is awesome and you will meet so many different people, there is always loads of friends to meet and connect with you know. It’s four years, it’s not forever. Listen to what your head tells you. Do a lot of research. Go on a trip and make sure you love it when you will arrive here, you will know.” (ISA2)

“What’s stopping you? It’s four years, if you don’t want to stay after that you don’t have to. I made so many friends. It gives you the chance to meet more people. You can branch out.” (ISA6)

“You have to be strong and be prepared to everything. I saw a lot of friends get destroyed because they thought that live here was easy. It’s not. You need to roll up your sleeves and work hard.” (ISA7)

“Definitely spread your wings don’t stay uh just focusing on the sport part of it. Try to get like have as much experiences as you can uh meet people from outside of athletics.” (ISA8)