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# Acculturation of International Student-Athletes

Alexandra L. Frawley

*The University Of Akron*, [alf63@zips.uakron.edu](mailto:alf63@zips.uakron.edu)

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Acculturation of International Student-Athletes

Alexandra Frawley

The University of Akron

## Abstract

This research project was conducted in order to investigate the current recruitment and assimilation processes experienced by international-student athletes at an NCAA Division I university, and to identify ways to improve those processes. The investigation was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven international student-athletes. The ages of these participants ranged from between 18 and 22 years old, 1 and 3 years of attendance at the University, and consisted of 5 females and 2 males. The participants play a variety of different sports, and each had a unique country of origin. The analysis revealed language, dietary changes, and social support are among various other themes experienced as difficulties for these students as they seek to make a transition into an American university. Suggestions such as greater coaching support, more focused university programming, and individual mindset changes are discussed further.

*Keywords:* international students, student-athlete, acculturation

## **Introduction**

The topic of this research project is the acculturation process(es) experienced by international student-athletes. This topic is important because a large percentage of the student-athletes at any given university are international students. This research is focused on the main causes of stress in the assimilation process into life as a student-athlete at an American university. In the Literature Review, the stressors for international students were identified, followed by the stressors experienced by student-athletes. These causes are, for example, lifestyle changes, homesickness, academic performance, and assimilation into a new culture, which were recurring themes of stress for both student bodies. Representing a significant 6.2% of student-athletes in America, it is imperative to study the main causes of stress for these students so as to ease the transition period into an American university (Kim, Love, & DeSensi, 2009). Programs can be developed so as to reduce these stressors and allow full integration into university life in a foreign country with less difficulty for these students. In the literature review, we will identify the main causes of stress for these two separate categories of students, and from there identify my research question for my own study of international student-athletes.

## **Literature Review**

### *Stress and International Students*

According to “International students reported English fluency, social support, satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress” by Inose and Yeh, acculturative stress is defined as a “distinctive type of stress associated with individuals’ cross-cultural encounters, which can manifest in physical, social, and psychological problems” (2003, p. 16). In order to identify which stressors manifested the most difficulties for international

studies, Inose and Yeh distributed surveys to international student groups. Their research discovered that self-reported English language fluency was a significant factor in handling acculturative stress. This affects international students in three separate ways. First, international students may feel more comfortable interacting with ease with majority group members on campus more smoothly. Second, international students may feel less self-conscious about their own language, accent, ethnicity, and background, in turn affecting their ability to ask for help, order food, meet new people, etc. Third, higher levels of English fluency would help international students out in an academic setting; for example, if a student had a higher level of comfort with English, he/she would “Be more likely to participate in class discussions” (Inose & Yeh, 2003, p. 23). Chen (1999) states, “The less international students interact with others the poorer their social and language skills become, and the more disconfirmed they felt, all of which creates a negative cycle” (p. 52). International students who possess a stronger initiative to grow also typically report greater ease of adjustment (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013).

#### *Cultural Differences and Difficulties Encountered by International Students*

Social connectedness and support network satisfaction were significant factors in managing acculturative stress for international students. Collectivist cultures are highly prevalent in Latin American, Asian, and African cultures, and also in more rural areas. In North American, Northern European, and Western European, and urban cultures, individualism is most commonly seen (Hofstede, 1989). In Asian, African, and Latin/Central American cultures, there is a strong emphasis on interdependence and close connections. American students and students from Western cultures tend to “Stress their independence, unique attributes, and behave according to their own selfish needs and desires” (Inose & Yeh, 2003, p. 24). In contrast, many cultures

define themselves as people based on their references to feelings and behaviors of close others. According to Triandis (1989), collectivist cultures must feel interdependent and involved with other group members, and also view their relationships as “Nurturant, respectful, and intimate” (p. 509). This difference in cultures may lead international students to “Feel disappointed in their relationships with Americans and perceive them as superficial,” because they do not believe that the students truly care about them (Inose & Yeh, 2003, p. 16). Therefore, if a university does not have a strong social support system for international students, they may feel ostracized from the society and be unable to validate their sense of interdependency.

International students often “Underutilize mental health and counseling services on campus about these problems because of cultural differences in beliefs about mental health, stigma attached to seeing help, unfamiliarity with counseling services, and an overall lack of knowledge about available resources” (Inose & Yeh, 2003, p. 17). However, according to Baba and Hosoda (2014), “Social support was positively related to cross-cultural adjustment, after controlling for each of the stress factors (academic pressure, financial stress, homesickness, perceived discrimination, and social disconnectedness)” (p. 11). For example, Gómez, Urzúa, and Glass (2014) found that the “Effects of participation in on-campus social events on social adjustment and the formation of cross-cultural social networks bolster the more recent emphasis on the importance of weak ties in the acculturative process” (p. 21). These weak ties with US American students provide international students with a “Source of practical information, access to social groups they may otherwise be unaware of, and initiation of cross-cultural relationships” (Gózem, et al., 2014, p. 11). This information provides a possibility of involvement in collegiate athletics as a good source of cultural information and an immediate support system upon arrival as an international student-athlete.

Another difficulty that international students face culturally is with their financial means, as well as finding living and transportation arrangements. Oftentimes, these international students must “Use all of their personal savings and assets, or search for and obtain outside resources” (Chen, 1999, p. 56). On top of being in a country with an unfamiliar culture, these students must be able to afford to attend the university, with limited work options available, if scholarships were not granted.

How an international student perceives his/her academic performance can potentially hinder or facilitate the cultural adaptation progress of that student. International students may have difficulty adjusting to an unfamiliar academic setting and tend to be extremely sensitive to their academic performance. Chen (1999) states that “Some educational stressors may include performance expectations, system adjustment, and test-taking anxiety” (p. 52). Also, he/she may “Experience varied degrees of discrepancy between their expected and actual academic performances...due to second language anxiety and difficulties adapting to the new educational and sociocultural environments” (Chen, 1999, p. 53). This only adds more stress to the international students, while having the potential to decrease self-esteem and inhibit their adjustment to the new culture. Finally, “There are value-oriented and structure-oriented elements involved in classroom instruction” (Chen, 1999, p. 53). This includes several factors, including class lectures and discussions, presentations, expectation of creativity, perceived respect, levels of formality and informality, among other things. According to the Power Distance Index created by Hofstede (1986), Venezuela, Brazil, and Spain possess Large Power Distances. This means that their education is teacher-centered, and that the communication is only initiated by the teacher. It is inappropriate to challenge the teacher and/or cause them to lose face, as well as having definite paths outlined by the professors. However, in countries like the United States,

Sweden, and New Zealand with Small Power Distances, it is appropriate and encouraged for students to speak up openly, contradict or challenge their teacher, and to find their own paths (Hofstede, 1986, p. 313). Therefore, international student-athletes from countries that possess Large Power Distances may experience confusion and discomfort due to the free communication in the American classroom.

#### *Difficulties Encountered by Student-Athletes*

Pritchard and Wilson (2005) conducted a survey to identify areas of stress for student-athletes at a private, Division I Midwestern university. They found that athletes experience unique stressors related to their role as an athlete on campus, including “Extensive time demands...injuries, the possibility of being benched/red-shirted...conflicts with their coaches” (p. 1). Almost half of the male athletes and slightly more than half of the female athletes indicated that “Stresses associated with sport participation, such as pressure to win, excessive anxiety, frustration conflict, irritation and fear significantly affected their mental or emotional health” (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005, pp. 1-2). Mental health concerns are only just part of the stressors that student-athletes experience on campus. “Many athletes report physical health problems also, including lack of sleep, continuous tension, fatigue, headaches, and digestive problems” (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005, p.2).

Although these student-athletes reported a variety of psychological and physical health concerns, they tend to avoid seeking out necessary counseling assistance. “10% of college athletes suffer enough from psychological and physiological problems that are severe enough to require counseling intervention” (Pritchard and Wilson, 2005, p. 2) Along with athletic stressors, student-athletes find themselves struggling with academic aspects as well. For example, “95% of male athletes and 86% of female athletes were stressed by factors such as: tests and



examinations, preparing papers for class, missing classes because of travel, and making up missed assignments” (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005, p. 2). Student-athletes are at an academic disadvantage due to the fact that they are constantly fatigued, distracted by athletic commitments, and even miss class time due to events. Athletes also struggle with “Negative and unsatisfactory relationships with teachers, coaches and fellow athletes” (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005, p. 4). For example, their study found that “Athletes reported more stress stemming from conflicts with their boyfriend or girlfriend’s family than did their non-athlete peers” (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005, p. 4).

International student-athletes also face a variety of NCAA restrictions that may inhibit them from receiving necessary financial aid. Many times, although a full athletic scholarship is supposed to cover all of the needs of the student-athlete, many universities leave a gap in the amount of financial aid provided and the actual cost of attendance. This is a problem because many international student-athletes with nonimmigrant visas are not allowed to work off of campus to earn the necessary funds to live comfortably due to The Patriot Act and Immigration and Nationality Act (Stewart, 2013). Many times, there are no available job openings on campus due to a high demand of students needing additional income to pay for their education. Also, even if international students were able to legally work off of campus, they may not have the means of transportation or language abilities to accomplish their tasks successfully. Finally, student-athletes are under a rigorous time schedule between classes, practices, games, traveling, and scheduled treatment time for injuries. The average student-athlete spends about the same amount of time as a full-time job on their sport, therefore leaving little to no time to even hold a job.

For international students, English language fluency, differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures, social support systems, finances, perceptions of academic performance, and the underutilization of mental health and counseling resources on campus were identified as the main stressors. For student-athletes, the main stressors identified were a high time demand, sports-related pressure, injuries and physical ailments, lack of sleep, keeping up with coursework, unsatisfactory relationships due to time constraints, and also an underutilization of mental health and counseling resources. For international student-athletes, a main stressor is receiving enough financial aid, while still complying with NCAA restrictions, to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Identifying these stressors for each student body led to the following research questions.

### ***Research Questions***

The previous research has discovered several unique traits about each separate student body, as student-athletes and as international students, and gathered factors of stress for each type of student at an American university. The research questions were developed to provide an all-inclusive insight into the unique challenges that international student-athletes are faced with.

RQ1: What are the main challenges that international student-athletes face?

RQ2: What would ease their transition?

### **Methods**

For the study, seven subjects were first identified by their status as an international student-athlete at The University of Akron. The ages of participants ranged from 18 – 21 years old. 5 of the participants were female, and 2 were male. Two of the participants are in their first year at the University, three are in their second year, and two are in their junior year. Four participants play soccer, one is on the track and field team, one is on the swimming and diving team, and one plays volleyball. The participants are from Spain, Sweden, Venezuela, Serbia, Brazil, Poland, and New Zealand. These characteristics were important to receive a variety of viewpoints and suggestions, as opposed to being limited in some aspect. All participation was completely voluntary, and participants were fully informed about the goals of the study. The method utilized to obtain the research was through in-depth interviews of the subjects. The interviews lasted about thirty minutes on average per participant, utilizing a questionnaire consisting of fifteen questions. These interviews took place in a public, central on-campus location. The subjects were informed that their disclosed answers would be solely for the use of improving the current and future assimilation process(es) for international student-athletes.

## Findings

### *Challenges encountered by the international students*

Insufficient Coaching Staff Support. The first identifiable theme was that international student-athletes had an easier transition period if their coach was either from another country or if they had previous experience recruiting these student-athletes. If the coach had previous international student-athlete experience(s), the athletes had an easier transition period and felt as though they had a better support system. However, for the student-athletes with a coach who was new to recruiting and serving as a resource for an international student, the transition period was much more difficult. These student-athletes were “uncomfortable going to their coaching staff” and also would have preferred if the coaches “had more knowledge on their special responsibilities as an international student”. Besides the technical aspects of the international recruitment process (visas, legal processes, etc.), the student-athletes from Europe desired for their coaching staff to “serve as a parent away from home” and also invite them into their office for weekly meetings, just to check up and make sure that the student-athlete was adjusting well and had no questions, problems, or concerns. However, in contrast, the student-athletes from a Latin American culture felt as though their coaches did not need to provide more support, and that they were comfortable approaching them with their problems. This may be due to the fact that typically in Latin American cultures, “Students expect their teacher to initiate conversation” and “Students only speak up when invited by the teacher” (Hofstede, 1989, pp. 309-313). Since the coaching staff are teachers of the sport played by the student-athlete, these responses may have been due to the fact that it would have been abnormal for the student-athlete to approach his/her mentor(s).

Insufficient Team Support. Another issue at hand for the international student-athletes came in the form of support from their teammates or creating friendships. A recurring trend with Latin American student-athletes was that they felt as though their teammates were not supportive or accommodating to their special circumstances. Upon arrival, they were shocked and struggled to “understand the American mindset, which is very individualistic” and also discussed how their teammates made no effort to make them feel at home, or ask them about their home country. One participant mentioned that they “feel more comfortable sharing a personal problem with their coach than their teammates”, and this was because they “did not want to show weakness to who they are competing with.” All of these participants noted that while there were opportunities to interact with other international students, they felt as though being labeled as a student-athlete differentiated them too much to build any other friendships outside of the athletic realm.

Academic Pace. One major theme that arose from the interviews was that the pace of life in America was challenging to keep up with, in both athletics and academics. In the classroom, many participants struggled to keep up with the fast pace of assignments and the learning plan for each semester, along with balancing their sport. Many of them felt as though the amount of information in each class was appropriate for a year-long class, and was crammed into a single semester. However, some participants mentioned how much more caring the professors in America are, and how they “make sure that each student is going to understand the material and succeed.” Another difficulty that these international student-athletes faced was the new pace and competition of NCAA Division I athletics. They mentioned struggling with not being the best at their sport anymore, and having to compete daily with their friends. Another different aspect was that their sport was integrated into their schedule, and took up much more time. Many of the

participants had never partaken in weight-lifting or strength training before, and therefore had to learn new skills and undergo body composition changes.

Homesickness. In regards to homesickness, most participants mentioned that they utilized Skype or video-calling technology to communicate with their families. They also mentioned that spending time with their roommates or friends participating in activities such as homework, other athletic events, shopping, going out to eat, and others helped to distract them. The participants who were further along in their academic career had struggled less with homesickness.

English Language Practice. A trend that a large majority of interviewees who spoke English as a second language mentioned was that forcing themselves to interact with native English speakers and purposely participating in conversations greatly eased their transition. One large source of assistance in English practice was the Athletics Academic department, where they were required to attend mandatory study table hours and also work with a tutor.

Dietary Changes. Another major theme was the culinary differences of food in American and food in their home countries. For participants from Eastern European and Latin American cultures, they struggled with the differences between food options and meals in America for a long time. They all mentioned how processed American food is, and the lack of importance for meal times. For example, one participant mentioned that she missed meal times being a source of conversation and relationship-building. They all mentioned that they gained weight and their bodies changed upon arrival, until they were able to move to an off-campus location and cook their own meals. One participant disclosed how “high the prices of healthy, natural food” are in America, and how difficult fast food made eating healthily.

### Discussion

The answer to the first research question, inquiring about the main challenges faced by international student-athletes, includes coaching staff support, team support, English language practice, dietary changes, academic pace, and homesickness. Based on these challenges, the second research question will be answered with the following suggestions for current coaching staff and faculty, University programming, as well as for international-student athletes.

First, the coaching staff should be addressed. According to the results, the assimilation process for international student-athletes could be easier if the coaches showed more individualized attention to these athletes. This could be achieved if the coach scheduled weekly meetings with each international student-athlete, to discuss personal life, their adjustment, and to see if there was anything that they needed. This would also include having office hours and an open-door policy for them to come in at any time if there was something that they needed. Overall, one participant summed this idea up by stating, “The coaches just need to show us that they care.” Also, in order to keep the International Office and coaching staff on the same page as far as legal aspects, visas, etc., some students suggested that their coaching staff undergo mandatory annual training in order to be aware of the necessary requirements that these student-athletes must undergo. This way, when coaches have their weekly meetings, they are aware of the entire process that their student-athlete is experiencing and ensure that they are having a smooth transition process.

Second, the University should institute programs and services available for international student-athletes as their own individual population. In order to comprehend more English, one student recommended that each international student-athlete was assigned an American

roommate in order to force assimilation, gain a better understand of American culture, and practice their English skills. It would be beneficial to hold either a mandatory workshop for the international student-athletes on how to eat properly in a new culture, or to even incorporate this into the orientation process for international students as a whole. The Athletics Administration should create a weekly opportunity for all international student-athletes to gather and have social interaction about their experiences assimilating into the culture. This group could be mandatory for freshmen student-athletes, and then optional and encouraged for upperclassmen. This way, these international student-athletes could share their experiences and assist each other. It could also encourage them to make friends and have a support group outside of their own team. Finally, along similar lines, it is recommended for the Athletics Administration to assign “buddies” to each international student-athlete. Each international student-athlete would be partnered with an American student-athlete. They will be required to meet at least once per week, but are encouraged to develop true friendships. These partnerships will be ideal to facilitate conversations in English, assist them with their transition, have social time with American students, and also have any questions answered if necessary. This would benefit the American student-athletes by developing their leadership skills and reducing any individualistic or ethnocentric mindsets.

For future international student-athletes, there are also several recommendations for these students. First, it is recommended that they utilize the available, free resource of the athletics nutritionist to adjust to the new foods in America. After the aforementioned workshop, the international student-athletes could be encouraged to meet one-on-one with the nutritionist to create a specific diet plan necessary for their body and sport’s caloric requirements. Another participant suggested that although the new student-athlete may feel homesick or nervous, to



“just say yes” to going to social events or other athletic events, and to “force themselves into conversations to practice English”. Another participant recommended for each international student-athlete to “have an open mind” and “enjoy the experiences in college”.

There were a few limitations in the process of this study. First, due to the busy nature of student-athletes, it was difficult to interview the seven participants. After selecting participants to interview, multiple email correspondences were sent to their email addresses on file, and several student-athletes failed to respond. Ideally, ten to fifteen participants would have been interviewed, in order to gain a wider, more inclusive spectrum of information from a wider variety of international student-athletes. It was difficult to schedule interviews due to the student-athletes being in-season and required to travel, along with several schedule conflicts. Another limitation to take into consideration is that several of the student-athletes spoke English as a second language, and therefore some questions may have been misunderstood or they may have limited their answers, due to uncertainty with English descriptions. Finally, the student-athletes may have felt uncomfortable discussing their true opinions with someone whom they are unfamiliar with, and may have changed their answers. They may have been nervous that any information disclosed about their coaching staff, faculty, or teammates would have led to repercussions if they had negative experiences.

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## Appendix A




Office of Research Administration  
Akron, OH 44325-2102

## NOTICE OF APPROVAL

February 27, 2015

Alexandra Frawley  
314 5<sup>th</sup> Street  
Marietta, Ohio 45750

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator 

Re: IRB Number 20150221 "Recruitment and Assimilation of International Student - Athletes"

Thank you for submitting your Exemption Request for the referenced study. Your request was approved on February 27, 2015. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

- Exemption 1 – Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.
- Exemption 2 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.
- Exemption 3 – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.
- Exemption 4 – Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.
- Exemption 5 – Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.
- Exemption 6 – Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study's design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact me to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Approved consent form/s enclosed

Cc: Y. Lin - Advisor  
Cc: Valerie Callanan - IRB Chair

## Appendix B

Acculturation Questionnaire

1. What is your country of origin? How long have you lived there? Had you been to America before attending The University of Akron?
2. How did you learn about The University of Akron? What other schools were you considering?
3. Describe the recruitment process for you. What factors led you to choose The University of Akron?
4. When did you have to arrive on campus? How would you describe your support system upon arrival?
5. Explain any differences or similarities between playing your sport in your home country versus America.
6. How well would you describe your fluency with the English language? What language do you speak at home? How has this affected your adjustment?
7. What is different about the food here? Has the dietary change affected you at all?
8. What do you do in your free time outside of the classroom and athletic events?
9. Explain how the classroom learning experiences are different than your home country. What are the differences? What has been the easiest and hardest about the classroom experience here?
10. Do you experience homesickness? How do you deal with that?
11. What have been the hardest adjustments for you to make (living on own, financial responsibility, academic adjustments, sports, etc.)? What have been the easiest?
12. How easy do you find communicating with your coaches? Teammates? What problems do you come across?
13. What resources does the University provide you with as far as being an international student? What do you wish they would have had for you?
14. What suggestions do you have for future international student-athletes, as well as for the coaching staff and faculty at the University of Akron to make the transition smoother?