

Do we need social capital to improve our language proficiency? International student-athletes' language barrier and the benefits of social capital

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ABSTRACT

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), almost 25,000 athletes worldwide participate in diverse sports at the collegiate level (Become an International Student-Athlete, n.d.). International Student-Athletes' gifted athletic performance tends to contribute to a team's winning, which is directly related to an increased level of athletic program (Ridinger & Pastor, 2001). Due to this reason, their athletic ability has been highly valued, and coaches and athletic administrators try to recruit gifted athletes worldwide (Ridinger & Pastor, 2001). However, despite these positive factors of having ISAs on the team, limited research has been conducted concerning ISAs' challenges and supportive practices. To support, Love and Kim (2011) stressed that due to the increased number of ISAs in collegiate athletics in the United States, issues related to ISAs should be explored. According to Yoon's (2023) study, the language barrier is one of the difficult challenges among ISA populations, and it should be minimized for their academic performance (Kwon, 2009; Woods et al., 2006; Lin, 2012), which is related to their athletic eligibility (Hodes et al., 2015).

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital can naturally occur in our society and can be utilized as social energy, continuously providing and exchanging beneficial resources for those within the same group. In addition, social capital offers numerous valuable resources for ISAs, as they need to improve their English skills while adapting to new cultures in both academic and athletic settings within the higher education system in the United States (Yoon, 2023). He also added that ISAs can learn many things from social capital, and it also provides tremendous opportunities to improve English ability through continuous social interactions. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the international student-athletes' perspectives on the language barrier and how social capital positively impacts minimizing language barriers and developing their language proficiency.

A qualitative research method was adopted to explore current ISAs' authentic experiences. The snowball sampling method was used to find suitable participants, and twelve current ISAs in various sports were selected from D-I, D-II, and D-III universities under the NCAA. The data was collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and the collected data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

As a result, most participants stated that following up on academic practices, such as writing, speaking, and reading, is not easy with the new language. They needed extra time to complete academic duties and translators to fully comprehend some specific terminologies in English. To overcome challenges resulting from language barriers, most participants are willing to meet with friends and teammates to engage in productive work, thereby improving their language skills. Some participants appreciated having social capital for their language development and believed that it had been significantly improved due to their social capital. In addition, as supportive practice for the future, most participants suggested increased gathering opportunities, such as team dinners,

casual team meetings, pairing with senior and new ISAs, and creating social events for domestic student-athletes and ISAs. Another remarkable suggestion from this study is that ISAs need to feel welcomed and supported by coaches, teammates, and administrators because they are far from their family and home country, which does not provide the same environments as they used to have, such as food, weather, transportation system, bank system, and leisure activities etc.

INTRODUCTION

Talented student-athletes come from around the world to the United States to pursue their athletic and academic goals in the higher education system. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), almost 25,000 athletes worldwide participate in diverse sports at the collegiate level (Become an International Student-Athlete, n.d.). These individuals are recruited due to increased competition levels in collegiate athletics under the NCAA (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). Furthermore, according to these authors, international student-athletes' (ISAs) athletic abilities tend to contribute to a team's winning, which is directly related to an increased university's competition level. Due to these positive factors, intercollegiate-level institutions in the United States strive to capitalize on recruitment opportunities for gifted foreign student-athletes worldwide, thereby enhancing the success of their athletic programs (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). Other previous scholars added that coaches try to recruit ISAs because of their positive impact on goal-oriented work ethics (Asher, 1994) and professionalism (Hoffer, 1994), which can contribute to domestic student-athletes' learning opportunities. Besides these positive impacts, ISAs provide learning opportunities for cultural diversity in the team, which tend to expand coaches' and teammates' perspectives on beliefs and norms (Baghurst et al., 2018). Ridinger and Pastore (2001) further argue that ISAs' gifted athletic performance highly contributes to teams' wins, which tend to increase local pride for the university. As the number of ISAs has demonstrated and previous scholars have noted, ISAs have become integral components of athletic programs in the United States. Therefore, athletic administrators, academic advisors, professors, and coaches should pay more attention to providing a supportive environment for this population. However, despite these positive factors of having ISAs on the team, limited research has been conducted concerning ISAs' challenges and supportive practices. Love and Kim (2011) also stressed that due to the increased number of ISAs in collegiate athletics in the United States, issues related to ISAs should be explored.

In general, living in a different country requires learning a new language if the new country uses a different language. The mother language in the United States is English, and the majority of ISAs need to demonstrate a high level of English proficiency to successfully pursue their goals in the United States. In common, all courses and classroom activities are conducted in English in academic settings, and practice and game environments always require English in athletic settings. Participating in classroom activities and practices is not enough; they must have a certain GPA to be eligible for athletic standards under

the NCAA (Hodes et al., 2015). This factor indicates that they have two important duties to perform at the same time while learning a new language: being a good student and a good athlete.

The level of English proficiency is a crucial factor for ISAs' success in the United States. According to Rao (2017), depending on the ISAs' primary language, if English is not the language they use in their country, they will experience significant challenges daily due to the language barriers in the United States. A low level of English proficiency may lead to a failing grade (Kwon, 2009; Woods et al., 2006; Lin, 2012), and negative academic performance will negatively affect athletic eligibility (Hodes et al., 2015). In everyday life, people communicate with others through language (Wilson et al., 2012). If ISAs feel communication challenges with professors, coaches, teammates, and colleagues, the overall results in academic and athletic settings cannot be shown positively. Thus, developing supportive practices for ISAs' language development can be crucial for their overall success in the United States. For example, in classroom settings, if there are ISAs who demonstrate a lack of English proficiency, professors should pay closer attention to ensure they fully understand the course context. In addition, professors can make extra meeting times or introduce English tutors for ISAs who show a lack of language proficiency.

Social capital provides beneficial resources as potential assets to group members (Bourdieu, 1986), and people can experience positive outcomes in everyday lives due to the positive social capital (Conrad, 2007). It can be established through social networks with trustworthy behavior (Richardson, 2012), continuously reproducing additional social networks in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986). As previous scholars have indicated, the beneficial factors of social capital, the study by Forbes-Mewett and Pape (2019) demonstrates that social capital provides valuable resources for ISAs living in the United States. As such, since ISAs often experience homesickness, difficulty adapting to a new culture in the U.S., and language barriers (Pierce, 2012), social capital can be beneficial in mitigating these challenges.

Among the common challenges faced by the ISA population, such as homesickness, cultural differences, and language barriers (Meadows et al., 2011), according to Baghurst et al. (2018), the language barrier is the most significant challenge for foreigners. Abel (2002) further argues that language barriers can cause additional stress for ISAs, especially when they are in a new environment. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore how social capital positively impacts minimizing and developing language barriers for ISAs from their perspectives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social capital can be used as social energy, and it continuously provides and exchanges beneficial resources for those who are in the same group (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital can naturally emerge in a group of communities; however, according to Bourdieu (1986), an institution's initial action to foster social capital is a crucial factor from the outset. This author noted that for positive

social capital, people tend to engage in thoughtful exchanges, such as expressing gratitude, showing respect, and using kind words, to maintain mutual understanding and recognition with others. Hanifan (1916) stressed that by being members of communities, students would improve their educational performance through the concept of social capital. As previous researchers have described, ISAs need to build social capital to achieve success in the United States. In common, to build social capital, we need to start communicating with others in English and participating in social gatherings. According to Yoon's (2023) study, social capital brings many beneficial resources for ISAs because they need to improve their English ability while adapting to new cultures in academic and athletic settings in the higher education system in the United States. He also added that ISAs can learn many things from social capital, and it also provides tremendous opportunities to improve English ability through continuous social interactions.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method was adopted to explore current ISAs' authentic experiences. Furthermore, in order not to focus on obtaining a practical set of numerical values, to deal with the actuality of truly experienced circumstances by participants (Gale, 1993), the qualitative research method was used. The snowball sampling method was used to find suitable participants, and twelve current ISAs in various sports were selected from D-II universities under the NCAA. The data was collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and the collected data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

In detail, interviews lasted 25-35 minutes and were recorded using an iPhone 15 Pro's Voice Memo feature. Probing questions, such as, "Could you please share your overall experiences of being ISAs in the United States?" or "You stressed out that... so can you please share your stories with me more?", "As an ISA, what have been the most common/difficult challenges you have faced in the United States? And what kind of practices have you done to overcome these challenges?", "Do you think social capital provides beneficial resources for ISAs?", "Has your English proficiency developed through communicating and spending time with your friends? "If you are in charge of ISAs, what can be the most important programs/practices for ISAs?", "For future ISAs, please share what skills they should improve to have a successful life in the U. S.?" In these questions, causal conversations were primarily conducted with ISAs, while still prefacing an informed consent agreement with a detailed explanation of this study. Information about the study participants is shown in Table 1.

Participant	Years in College in the U.S.	Institution level	Ethnicity	Sports type	Nationality
1	2 years	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Russia
2	4 years	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Spain
3	3 years	D2	Caucasian	Individual	France
4	4 years	D2	Hispanic	Individual	Columbia
5	5 years	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Czech Republic
6	2 years	D2	Asian	Individual	France
7	1 year	D2	Hispanic	Individual	Spain
8	1 year	D2	Hispanic	Individual	Spain
9	3 years	D2	Hispanic	Individual	Spain
10	2 years	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Latvia
11	1 year	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Germany
12	3 year	D2	Caucasian	Individual	Switzerland

Table 1. Information about the study participants

Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA was used to analyze all collected interview data. The entire data analysis procedure followed the steps of IPA developed by Smith et al. (2009). When it comes to steps of analyzing data with IPA, researchers analyze data using IPA by examining statements from participants line-by-line, illustrating how they understand the phenomenon in question through their experiences. Afterward, themes and patterns are carefully identified by reading the statements of each participant. In the third step, a dialogue should be developed between the collected data and the initial themes, which are informed by researchers' knowledge and experiences. In the final step, a framework should be established to highlight the relevance of the themes and organize the data results, providing a clear understanding of how the interpretation evolved from the original transcripts.

Conducting this research with IPA could provide insight into the ISAs' experiences of making sense of their challenges related to language barriers and

how social capital has supported them in minimizing language barriers and improving English proficiency.

Regarding analysis procedures of IPA, as Emery and Anderman (2020) suggested, this research's researchers start line-by-line, focusing on illustrations of participants' statements from their experience and how they comprehend the phenomenon in question. Afterward, codes and themes were identified by reading each participant's statements.

For this research, IPA was the best fit because the study's research team desired to have a deeper understanding of how ISAs interpret their experiences of language barriers and beneficial factors of social capital. Additionally, since IPA is iterative, we can refine each analysis procedure enacted for every logical step to support conclusions, making it impossible to discover a universal truth. Accordingly, data analysis was conducted using the following steps.

1. Each interview's data was carefully listened to and transcribed; then, the initial transcripts were read and listened to simultaneously to increase the researcher's active engagement with the data set.
2. Each transcript was divided into groups, followed by meanings, identifying notional comments for the initial notes. The following step developed emergent themes from the initial notes. In this step, superordinate themes were established by checking emergent themes' interrelationships.
3. The third step was repeated for the first and second steps to increase the rigorous procedure, and then superordinate themes were analyzed, anticipating sameness and differences to generate the final themes.
4. In the final step, the finalized themes from the data results were carefully reviewed to determine their relevance to one another, providing a clear understanding of how the interpretation evolved from the original transcripts.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers should be able to manifest how data analysis has been carried out by documenting, framing, and showing the analysis methods in detail, allowing the reader to conclude whether the research process is trustworthy (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Côté & Turgeon, 2005; Ryan et al., 2007). Thus, documents should be organized, field notes should be composed, and interview transcripts should be chosen for detailed inspection (Riessman, 2005). To increase the rigor and trustworthiness of this study, initial and final interview transcripts were shared with participants for data accuracy as a member-checking method.

FINDINGS

Twelve current ISAs participated in an in-person interview. They expressed their experiences regarding perspectives on language barriers, the importance of social capital, and supportive practice for ISAs. As the literature review stated above, most participants pointed out the language barrier as the most difficult challenge experienced in the United States, and how they perceived beneficial

outcomes from social capital regarding minimizing the language barrier and developing their English proficiency. They also mentioned how they will foster an environment for the development of social capital for current and future ISAs. Additionally, some participants emphasized the importance of social capital for the general well-being of ISAs in the United States. Therefore, the study result presents three sections: 1) the most difficult challenges as ISAs: the language barrier, 2) the importance of social capital, and 3) supportive practices for ISAs' general well-being on campus.

The most difficult challenges as ISAs: Language barriers

The first theme identified by the analysis of all participants' interview data is the language barrier. Since language is the most fundamental method in communicating with others, most participants shared their vivid experiences of having a difficult time in everyday life as ISAs due to language barriers. Especially in academic settings, they have experienced more challenges. Some participants also mentioned that language is the key to communicating with others, leading to the development of social capital. They perceived that language proficiency is important for excelling in various aspects of life in the United States, such as socializing with others and achieving good grades in coursework. In the interview, they were asked, "*As an international student-athlete, what has been the most common/difficult challenge you would face in the United States?*" Participants shared their perspectives on the most difficult challenge as a language barrier. For example:

Participant 2: I mean, I am really easy going with everything, but if I pick one that stresses me out, it can be a language barrier. I don't feel stress reading and writing, but speaking, though, because sometimes, some Americans don't get my accent, so it is hard for me to have a quick chat with my friends and professors.

Participant 3: At first, learning the new language was not easy for me. I mean... speaking and writing in a new language is not easy, especially in the classroom.

Participant 4: I think it's language barriers. Even though my English was pretty good when I got here, it's pretty difficult to keep up with the conversation in a larger social setting, especially when they're using all the idioms and stuff like that.

Participant 5: I feel the first issue was the language. For the first couple of months, it was pretty hard to speak... sometimes I was like, I didn't want to speak up because I just didn't know how to say.

Participant 6: Language... At the beginning, talking to professors was difficult because I didn't understand anything. Now I think I'm improving and can understand them better, even though sometimes I had to ask them something about the assignments after class.

Participant 7: I still have to use Google Translate when I study or do homework. I feel I'm not able to understand everything the professor asks, and I don't want to fail my classes. Learning a new thing takes longer just because of

the language.

Participant 8: Of course, the first one was the language barrier. At the beginning, it was hard to communicate with everyone and also to understand them. It wasn't because I was shy; it was difficult to meet new people when I didn't know the language.

Participant 9: Studying takes me double the time because of the language barrier. I need to translate everything first to understand.

Participant 10: Adapting to the new language, it was difficult at the beginning to understand the professors. Sometimes, it is still hard for me to understand some terminology. I have to make extra time to go to office hours to ask the professor about the class or go to tutoring. Also, during the exams, I need extra time to complete them.

Participant 11: I feel I can't have the same conversation in English as I can in Spanish. It is hard to express myself in a language that is not my first one. I feel frustrated when this happens, because I want people to understand me.

Participant 12: Even though I don't speak English that badly, there were moments where communication felt challenging, especially in high-pressure situations.

Participants 3, 7, 9, and 10 argued that following up coursework with a new language has not been easy for them; they need to spend extra time completing the course-related tasks, compared to their peers (domestic students). In general, following coursework in college can be challenging; however, like ISAs, learning subjects in a new language could require extra energy and time. Another remarkable factor found in Participant 5, 6, 8, and 10 is that they specifically stressed that they experienced language barriers at the beginning, but their language proficiency has improved over time. This factor implies that coaches and administrators can focus more on language development programs for the new ISAs if they are from countries where the mother language is not English. As the majority of participants stressed that the language barriers are the difficult challenge in the United States, coaches and administrators need to pay more attention to minimizing this challenge because it tends to affect negative academic performance (Kwon, 2009; Woods et al., 2006; Lin, 2012, Hodes et al., 2015) and this negative result potentially affects their athletic eligibility (Hodes et al., 2015).

Importance of social capital for English proficiency and well-being

The second theme, developed from the interview data of all participants, is the importance of social capital for English development. As previous scholars have argued (Bourdieu, 1986; Conrad, 2007), the beneficial factors of social capital, especially for ISAs (Forbes-Mewett and Pape, 2019), will provide opportunities for ISAs to develop their language proficiency over time. To explore the true experience from ISAs' perspectives, participants were asked, "*Do you think social capital would be beneficial for developing language in general*?" and they did not hesitate to answer the positive factors of social capital for their English development. For example:

Participant 2: Of course. Hanging out with people was the most helpful thing I did to improve my English. Even now I'm still learning new things, sometimes I still feel I don't know the language. Because there are a lot of words that I have to translate. I needed to survive in this new country, that's why I had to talk to people; if I needed something, I had to ask someone to help me. Being in a team helped me to improve my English, because I hang out with them every single day, and the only language we can use is English.

Participant 3: Yeah, as you know, we need help for many things. After knowing people, like teammates and classmates, we can hang out, do homework, and go to the cafeteria together. So, I have to speak English to do such things with them. Through talking to other people, even though we don't have a good level of English, I feel like our level of English got better. I think we can be better and better every time through talking to people. Yeah, so I feel like meeting a lot of people is very helpful for learning English.

Participant 5: Yeah, just being a part of a community or a group of friends is really good and can teach you a lot. I think I'm very thankful that happened to me my freshman year, that my roommates were American golfers and they actually brought me into their social setting. For my English, I'm grateful for that. I lived with three Americans. So, I think that's why my English improved a lot right away because I just had to speak English. I think that's very important.

Participant 6: As an international student, everything is new, the language, the culture, and everything. So, you need someone for help, because you will always need help. At the beginning, I had a community with the international group and American students. So, it was really nice to stay together to study and do some activities together. I do believe that having a community is important because you can practice and improve your English through it. I mean, my English wouldn't be as good as it is now without my friends and communities in town.

Participant 7: I explained to my professors that I was still learning the language, and some of them were very helpful. It helps knowing that I'm not the only one with the same problem. I have international friends who are facing the same obstacles, and we help each other.

Participant 8: I believe so. The more I meet my people in town, the easier it is for me to speak English because I feel more comfortable. And I feel like I am more motivated to have clear and better communication because I don't want to feel left out or something due to my language barrier. Yeah, so meeting my people whenever I am free is important for my English. And I think I've learned a lot of idioms and common slang through hanging out with my friends. So, my English is getting better, I think.

Participant 9: I always feel support from my team and my coach; they are my second family, and I could not imagine being alone this far from home. I don't feel alone, but I feel supported, and also my language is getting better because I can try starting conversations with them, so I can improve and improve every time I try to speak.

Participant 12: Yeah, if I didn't meet anybody, and I stayed at the dorm,

then my English would never be better, and I would feel lonely. Spending time with friends, either domestic or international, has helped me a lot in practicing my English. My listening skills improved a lot over this year. Domestic or some senior international friends always help me correct my English pronunciation. I love that. Because of them, I feel more confident speaking English, because I know my English has gotten way better, compared to the first semester when I literally had no friends here.

Participants 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 12 implied that social capital positively impacts ISAs' language improvement because it continuously provides English learning opportunities through social gatherings, especially for listening and speaking. These participants believed that through any activity done together, such as completing a course assignment, practicing, and socializing, they can ultimately develop their English communication skills. Additional positive factors of social capital implied by participants 3, 6, 7, 9, and 12 are less feeling of loneliness and being left out, while feeling supported and learning new things. These participants emphasized that, through developing social capital, they spend more time together as a group, which reduces their likelihood of feeling lonely and being left out on campus. Additionally, they feel strongly supported, relying on each other and learning about a new culture in the United States.

Supportive practices for ISAs' general well-being on campus

The third theme developed by all participants' interview data is the supportive practices for ISAs' general well-being on campus. To minimize ISAs' language barriers, as the second theme and its results proved, administrators, coaches, and teammates have knowledge of supportive practices for providing opportunities for developing social capital for ISAs. To explore effective practice for ISAs' language development, participants were asked, "*Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for schools and athletic departments to have better support programs for ISAs*"? They provided some suggestions along with their experience. For example:

Participant 1: I think having more meetings builds relationships inside the team. So, let them spend more time in a group, like team dinners or even just basic team meetings, where everyone gets to get familiar with each other. It helps them get closer to each other and understand each other because they all have different cultures, so they can find something similar to what they have at home.

Participant 2: I think schools should offer an English program or classes, just for those international students who don't have a good level of English, to help them improve, and teach them ways to improve it. I think international students would feel more comfortable in a school that shows they care about us (ISAs), and they want to help with our main struggle in this country, which is the language barrier.

Participant 3: Maybe doing a lot of activities with everyone, like international and non-international students. We can all gather to meet new people from other countries and share cultural stuff.

Participant 4: I feel like making sure to make us feel like we are not alone here. Also, like introducing whoever went through first as an international student, I feel like that's really important when it comes to understanding because they already went through being a student athlete, an international student athlete in America.

Participant 5: It's good to build a strong international community because if there's a person like you (researcher) who welcomes all of them into their family or home... just like knowing that you're welcome. Because yeah, and I did feel very welcome in your house and my coach's house. Also, I asked before I came, here, and that was if we will need a car when we come here, and everyone was telling me, no, no, no, you will be fine and most of the coaches gonna give you rides, but in reality, I needed a car, because no other international students had a car, so having no car was not easy.

Participant 6: Making sure they feel comfortable. They need people always, so making sure they know they can ask you anything, like buying a car or like, or where to find groceries, you know. And like having some activities together with everyone and new people, so they don't feel alone or are not welcomed.

Participant 7: I will create groups, not just internationals, but also mixing with Americans. For example, when we do events with internationals, it would be good to have domestic students. But maybe bring all student athletes to hang out together. Also, the international department should make mandatory meetings to explain things like paperwork, taxes, and how visas work.

Participant 8: I think the best thing that they can do is let international student-athletes know that if they need something, their coaches and teammates are gonna be there for them. Like, you want to show them that there is support for them, so they don't feel alone or left out.

Participant 9: I think it is important to support foreign students when they come to the school. They don't have the support from their parents, they feel alone, and they just want to feel welcome in their new house. Offering them help, like some type of transportation, because most of them (ISAs) don't have a car, so they are stuck in their dorms.

Participant 10: Trying to engage them with the team as much as possible and let them know about what kind of person you are. So, it's easier for them to understand you and help you. I think you should try to make connections with your professors and people in the class whom you could get help from. And probably to make sure that international student-athletes feel good in their teams and that they have the support from their teammates, coaches, making sure that they (ISAs) know that there would be support for them if they are feeling homesick or they are having issues with being here.

Participant 12: I would create a mental health and well-being program specifically for ISAs. Many international athletes struggle with homesickness, cultural adaptation, and pressure from their sports. Having access to sports psychologists, mentorship programs, and workshops on mental resilience would be extremely beneficial.

Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, and 12 strongly express their perspective about the importance of community gatherings. Through meeting people, ISAs will have opportunities to introduce themselves, share their initial background, and discuss their majors, sports, and other interests. At the same time, they can learn about other countries' cultures, trying to embrace differences and similarities. Including participant 5, participants 6 and 8 argued that ISAs want to feel welcomed and genuinely cared for by coaches and administrators. As Yoon's (2023) study showed, coaches are the ones who bring ISAs to their teams in the United States; it is common sense that coaches must put extra effort into players for their general well-being. Other considerable practices mentioned by participants 2 and 12 are English development classes and a mental health program for international students. As the first theme and interview date showed, most ISAs had to deal with language barriers in the beginning, and some of them are still struggling due to this reason. If the school has English development classes or specific tutoring programs for language development purposes for international students, it would be beneficial for them to overcome the language barrier. The other program suggested by participant 12 is a mental health program for international students. ISAs are not only experiencing language barriers, but also cultural differences and homesickness (Meadows et al., 2011) in the United States. This factor directly indicates that they are experiencing additional stress, beyond just academic and athletic settings. Thus, as Yoon's (2023) study suggested, athletic administrators and coaches may need to seek and provide counseling opportunities for ISAs' emotional and mental health can be necessary.

CONCLUSION

Due to increased competition levels in college athletics under the NCAA, and the level of contribution to the team's winning results from ISAs, collegiate athletics have tried to expand recruitment pipelines worldwide (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). This phenomenon has led to an increase in ISA populations in athletic programs under the NCAA. Not only do ISAs provide positive outcomes for athletic settings, but they also share goal-oriented work ethics (Asher, 1994) and professionalism (Hoffer, 1994) in athletic programs that provide learning opportunities for cultural diversity for domestic student-athletes. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the most significant challenge for ISAs and the practices they have employed to mitigate it.

As a result, most participants stated that following up on academic practices, such as writing, speaking, and reading, is not easy with the new language. They needed extra time to complete academic duties and translators to fully comprehend some specific terminologies in English. Sometimes they did not feel comfortable talking to others due to their language proficiency, and they struggled to share their feelings in English. To overcome challenges resulting from language barriers, they are willing to meet with friends and teammates to engage in productive work, thereby improving their language skills. Some participants appreciated having social capital for their language development and believed that it had been significantly improved due to their social capital.

In common, in the group, people do many productive activities together, and this factor indicates that it continuously provides opportunities for ISAs to speak English with friends. Some participants also show positive attitudes towards creating and developing social capital for the ISAs because they have learned many new things, such as cultural differences and norms through meeting new people, minimizing their homesickness and feeling of isolation, and feeling left out.

Furthermore, most participants suggested that gathering opportunities, such as team dinners, casual team meetings, pairing with senior and new ISAs, and creating social events for domestic student-athletes and ISAs, are essential to create and develop social capital initially because through these gathering opportunities, ISAs can introduce themselves to others, getting to know other students and student-athletes. Another remarkable suggestion from this study is that ISAs need to feel welcomed and supported by coaches, teammates, and administrators because they are far from their family and home country, which does not provide the same environments as they used to have, such as food, weather, transportation system, bank system, and leisure activities etc. Also, generally, since ISAs are vulnerable to experiencing homesickness, cultural shocks, and language barriers while they are fulfilling their academic and athletic duties, one participant suggested developing and providing a mental health and well-being program specifically for ISAs. Thus, this research team highly recommends that current athletic administrators, professors, academic advisors, and coaches consider the suggestions mentioned above to provide a better environment for current and future ISAs.

Limitations of the study

This study contains several limitations. First, since participants were selected from only Division II schools under the NCAA, findings of current ISAs' experiences might not fit all college-level athletic programs. Second, due to the researchers' personal experience, being in the position of ISAs, as a foreigner, graduate students as IS, personal bias could be an intruder in the data analysis and the finding process. Finally, not all participants had interviews in their native (primary) language and might not fully understand the research questions and the meaning of conducting this study.

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