



“I Want to Win in Life”: International Student-Athletes’ Postgraduate Decisions to Remain in the United States

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ABSTRACT

While international students enroll in and matriculate through higher education in the United States for various reasons, no study to date has examined the postgraduate ambitions of international student-athletes concerning their intention to remain in the United States. Accordingly, the present study explored the decisions of former international student-athletes to remain in the U.S. after graduation. The findings revealed that opportunities, influences, and perseverance were the main research priorities for international student-athletes in the U.S. Although international student-athletes most often indicate sports and athletics opportunities as the primary motivation for attending college in the United States, international student-athletes desired career, opportunities, and support from families and friends upon the conclusion of their athletic career factors in their decision to remain in the United States postgraduation.

Keywords: college athletes, international students, NCAA, post-athletic transition

INTRODUCTION

The number of international students attending universities in the United States (US) has steadily increased over the past decade, with nearly a million international students pursuing education at American colleges and universities (Institute of International Education; IIE, 2023). International students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and provide perspectives that enrich campus life and contribute to a vibrant academic community at US institutions of higher education (Belle et al., 2022). In addition, international students provide significant economic benefits to institutions, such as tuition fees, the ability to purchase goods and services, and the support of local businesses (Belle et al., 2022). Although international students often struggle to acclimate to life in the U.S., students have demonstrated that their direct participation or indirect connection to intercollegiate athletics eases the transition to higher education in the U.S. (Cormier, 2019; Kim et al., 2022, 2023).

The interconnectedness of athletics and higher education is distinct from American culture. This unique setting serves as a significant factor in motivating more than 25,000 international student athletes who migrate to the U.S. to compete at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) membership institutions on an annual basis (NCAA, 2021a; Popp et al., 2009; Ridpath et al., 2019). While extant research has examined motivations for international student-athletes to migrate to the U.S. for college (e.g., Love & Kim, 2011; Popp et al., 2009, 2011; Ridpath et al., 2019; Sage, 2010) as well as their experiences transitioning to higher education institutions (Cormier, 2019; Jolly et al., 2022), there is a gap in the literature concerning international student-athletes' decisions to remain in the U.S. postgraduate (Foster & Lally, 2021). Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand why international student-athletes choose to remain in the U.S. postgraduate program. International student athletes bring valuable skills, diverse perspectives, and a disciplined work ethic shaped by their athletic training, all of which benefit the US workforce (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2021; NAFSA, 2022). By understanding this population's motivations and challenges, educational institutions and policymakers can better shape programs and policies that support international student-athletes' integration into the workforce, benefiting both the students and the economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory

The present study is informed by the push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push-pull model in the context of international student migration explains the factors that influence students to leave their home countries and choose another destination, often for education or work opportunities (Lee, 1966; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Originating from migration theory, the push-pull framework posits that migration decisions are influenced by "push" factors, which drive individuals away from their home countries, and "pull" factors, which attract them to a host

country (Lee, 1966). This model has been widely applied to understand international student migration (e.g., Li & Bray, 2007; Zhang et al., 2024), particularly the motivations behind their choice to study and potentially stay in a new country postgraduate.

International Students in US Higher Education

International students often migrate to the US for education and employment opportunities and to improve their quality of life (Altbach, 2004; Love & Kim, 2011; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Sage, 2010). While pursuing personal advancement, international students also contribute significantly to the U.S. economy by investing in education, fostering community integration on campuses, and enhancing diversity through their unique cultural practices, perspectives, and languages (Belle et al., 2022; Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2021; NAFSA, 2022). These contributions enrich the academic environment by promoting cross-cultural exchange, improving social and intercultural skills, and fostering global citizenship among domestic students (Deardorff, 2009). Additionally, international students provide valuable skills and unique approaches to research, critical thinking, and problem solving, benefiting academic communities (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Han et al., 2015).

NCAA athlete participation

Athletic participation provides international student-athletes with the opportunity to pursue a college degree while competing in a structured athletics system unique to the US (Ridpath et al., 2020). Recruiting international student athletes can increase team performance by adding skilled, experienced players from competitive sports environments abroad (Bentzinger, 2016; Stokowski et al., 2013; Weston, 2006). Relationships with coaches, academic majors, and high-quality facilities play a role in attracting international student athletes (Hardin et al., 2013; Popp et al., 2010). However, international student athletes often face greater cultural, language, and social adjustment challenges than domestic athletes do (Jolly et al., 2022). For example, Hispanic international athletes have reported feeling discredited on campuses and struggling to adapt to collegiate athletics (Manwell et al., 2021; Turk et al., 2017).

Post-Athletic Transition & Residency Considerations

Influenced by social, political, and economic factors, international student-athletes struggle to decide where to reside upon graduation (Altbach, 2004; Bentzinger, 2016). Academic and career opportunities are primary motivators for remaining in the U.S. (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Belle et al., 2022; Han et al., 2015; Popp et al., 2009). Social factors also play a critical role, with institutional support systems, such as relationships with teammates, coaches, and romantic partners, making leaving the US socially and emotionally challenging (Ammigan, 2019; Popp et al., 2010). Additionally, economic opportunities, including higher-paying

jobs, access to research facilities, scholarships, and potential careers in professional sports, attract international student-athletes to remain in the U.S. postgraduate (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Belle et al., 2022; Foster & Lally, 2021; Popp et al., 2010; Ridpath et al., 2020).

Political and academic freedoms in the U.S., such as freedom of expression and the ability to pursue research without censorship, are additional factors influencing these decisions (Altbach, 2004; Han et al., 2015). However, many international students express a long-term desire to return to their home countries, viewing their US education as a means for future opportunities abroad (Han et al., 2015). Despite the abundance of research on international student-athlete college experiences, few studies have examined the postgraduate decisions of this population (Bentzinger, 2016; Jolly et al., 2022; Popp et al., 2009).

METHOD

To understand the participants' lived experiences, this study utilized a phenomenological approach and semistructured interview method (Dittmore & Stokowski, 2019; Lester, 1999). Participants were recruited through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. The initial recruitment targeted former international student-athletes through alumni networks and athletic associations, while snowball sampling allowed participants to recommend others with relevant experiences. While this method enabled access to individuals with rich experiential knowledge, it also introduced a potential for selection bias—favoring individuals with stronger post-graduation professional networks or those more inclined to share their experiences. The final sample consisted of 13 former international student-athletes representing various NCAA sports and academic levels (Table 1). While this aligns with phenomenological research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), future studies should aim for a larger, more diverse sample across different NCAA divisions and sports disciplines to enhance generalizability.

Additionally, gender representation was uneven (4 females, 9 males), which may limit findings regarding gendered experiences of post-graduation transitions. The interview protocol consisted of demographic questions (e.g., age, country, sport, gender) and 12 open-ended questions related to this study's intended purpose. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted an average of 45 minutes. To protect the identity of the participants, each pseudonym was selected.

Data Analysis

The study utilized a thematic analysis approach to examine interview data, employing a two-step process as outlined by Saldana (2009). Initially, process coding was applied, with a focus on the participants' actions and emotions. This phase identified distinct career goals that influenced international student athletes' decisions to remain in the U.S. postgraduate program.

Table 1. *Demographics of the participants*

Pseudonym	Highest Level of Education	Home Country	Age	Occupation
Bob	Masters	England	31	College Soccer Coach
Jack	Masters	France	27	College Tennis Coach
Jacob	Bachelors	Nigeria	28	Entrepreneur
Katie	Bachelors	Mexico	28	Business Analyst
Kevin	Masters	England	32	College Tennis Coach
Mark	Masters	England	27	Ph.D. Student
Martin	Masters	Columbia	34	Associate AD
Matthew	Bachelors	England	25	Tennis/Mental Coach
Megan	Masters	Russia	25	Tennis Coach
Michael	Masters	Germany	28	Soccer Coach
Natalia	Masters	Russia	26	Customer Success Coordinator
Oliver	Ph.D.	England	36	Assistant Professor
Victoria	Bachelors	Spain	25	Tennis Coach

In the second phase, pattern coding was conducted, where researchers reviewed the coded data for patterns, relationships, and connections. Codes were then grouped into themes and subthemes based on their similarities and differences, with evidence from the data supporting each theme (Saldana, 2009). Pattern coding revealed an overarching theme: career aspirations significantly influence international student-athletes' decisions to stay in the U.S. The analysis continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring adequate sample size. Independent coding by researchers was followed by collaborative discussions to identify emerging themes, and no discrepancies arose during these meetings.

Trustworthiness

The primary researcher is a former international student athlete who remained in the U.S. postgraduate program. Recognizing their positionality in the research and potential bias, additional researchers were included in the coding and analysis processes to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. In addition,

intercoder reliability checks were conducted periodically, and protocols such as member checking were utilized to ensure the accurate representation and depiction of participants' responses. While the primary researcher acknowledges their position with regard to a direct relationship with the data from an experiential standpoint, appropriate measures were taken to ensure the continued reliability and validity of the findings reported subsequently.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore international student athletes' decisions to remain in the U.S. upon graduation. Coding and analysis revealed three main themes: (1) opportunities, (2) influences, and (3) perseverance.

Opportunities

The participants discussed the abundance of career opportunities and life in the U.S. Attending colleges and universities in the U.S. allowed the participants to cultivate an understanding of the American workforce before seeking employment. Katie, a business analyst, discussed the breadth of job opportunities in the U.S. compared with her native country of Mexico:

The job opportunity and the job market in America, the pool, even though you may not make a lot of money when you're graduating, but it is a lot larger than it could be in Mexico. There are truly good jobs.

Similarly, Natalia, currently a customer success coordinator from Russia, stated, "I feel like I have more opportunities here."

In contextualizing the participants' desires to remain in the U.S. upon graduation, it is important to mention why the participants migrated to the U.S. For Matthew, a tennis coach from England, the decision to migrate to the U.S. was made because "the fact that I wanted to experience a new culture and new country to live in." However, for Jacob, an entrepreneur from Nigeria, the decision to migrate to the U.S. centered around an opportunity to build a better life:

I grew up in an environment where the [classrooms] did not even have windows...it was just like dirt on the ground...Therefore, imagine growing up like that and then you come to the US and like you know, it is different. It is like a whole different universe, not even a whole different world, a whole new universe.

For participants such as Katie, Natalia, Jack, and Jacob, the pursuit of "The American Dream" was central in their decisions to not only migrate to the US but also remain in the US after retiring from intercollegiate sports.

While participants such as Jacob indicated that the conditions in their native countries contributed to their desire to migrate to and remain in the U.S. postgraduation, other participants depicted a sense of feeling as if they belonged to the U.S. Oliver, an assistant professor and former college athlete from England, indicating that the U.S. college experience led to his overall maturation and resulted in a change within him. Oliver stated, “the person who I became was someone that was very comfortable in the United States.” This stated that acculturation via matriculation in U.S. higher education is noteworthy in and of itself, but the importance of differing motivations among participants to migrate to the U.S. depending on their native country is important to consider when attempting to understand the decisions of international student-athletes—and to an extent, international students write large—to remain in U.S. postgraduate.

Influences

The second theme that emerged in the data were influence. The participants highlighted how their experiences in collegiate athletics and support from their families played a significant role in their decision-making. Specifically, these factors heavily influence their choice to remain in the U.S. after graduation.

Sport Participation

Given the impact of the environment on career choice, 54% of the participants were employed as sport coaches or involved in intercollegiate athletics. Jack, a college tennis coach, explained that he wanted to have an impact on athletes because of the impression that his coach in the US had on him. Jack mentioned,

My tennis coach was the one that made an impact on me. He's truly the one who shared his passion for tennis with me and as a coach that is what I think influenced me to want to have the same impact with younger players and anyone that you know gets the tennis racket in their hand. Just sharing that passion and knowledge that we have about tennis. We also do not have college tennis in France, so college coaching is only available here, and this is what I wanted to do.

Matthew realized that he could not become a professional in his sport (tennis) but realized that he had a passion for coaching. Similarly, Kevin mentioned that he wanted to be a professional tennis player growing up, but one of his former coaches in his home country shared the possibility of playing college tennis and coaching in the U.S. Kevin stated,

When I was fourteen, I started to work with the new coach who had just come back from a playing college tennis, and he kind of opened my eyes to that as a possible path and journey. He

was an enormous inspiration if it was not for him, I wouldn't have even known that college tennis existed...starting freshman year I started to think about coaching career.

Megan initially thought that she would enter the medical field but began coaching tennis more and was inspired by her tennis coach. She went on to share:

I got along truly well with my undergraduate coach, and she taught me a lot and. I know the guy was just overall very, very happy and I was like if tennis brings him so much happiness and just coaching, maybe I will give it a try and see how it goes. Not playing but coaching.

Each participant highlighted the impact of participating in college sports in the U.S. Specifically, the participants spoke of the skills they learned through sport participation. Martin, a former soccer player from Columbia, discussed learning responsibility by participating in college sports:

You're different as an international student athlete. You need to figure out by yourself. In addition, that is sometimes in in your work you must figure out by yourself, just plan everything for yourself. You cannot call Mom and Dad for all your problems.

Similarly, Katie mentioned how her student-athlete background assisted her in the workplace:

Being from Mexico has pushed me harder to prove myself, especially in the office...but [being a former college tennis player] helps manage time more effectively than anybody else because you have a whole other side of commitments that you're tied to. In addition, it just makes you by the facto more responsible, just by the fact. I would say time management is one. Responsibilities and other ones. In addition, honestly, balance too.... I think it also teaches you camaraderie, you know, and working in a group environment. Which is mostly what you're going to do when you end up at whatever firm, at a job, any job.

Natalia discussed how being a former international student athlete pushed her to work harder:

I think as an international student athlete, we have to work triple as hard because you have pressure and then put additional pressure on yourself because you want to be successful and

make everyone proud. I think in a way it helped me to work harder and be better.

The participants emphasized that being an international student-athlete taught them crucial life skills. They all agreed that participation in college sports significantly contributed to their personal development. Even those no longer involved in athletics noted that they continue to apply the skills learned through their sports experiences to their profession.

Influence of Family and Friends

Many of the participants shared that family support was an important factor for them to remain in the U.S. rather than return to their home country. Bob, currently a college soccer coach from England, discussed the importance and value of his family's support in his native country:

[My family] has been extremely supportive. My mom and dad try to come out here every year and have ever since I have been out here, to see me. In addition, anything that I have kind of wanted to do; they have helped me along the way.

Like Bob, Jack mentioned:

My parents truly supported me emotionally, with my decision to stay here [in the US]. They knew I was happy here, happier probably than back home, that is their goal as parents to have their kids happy, do what they want to do. Therefore, they truly supported me with any decisions that I made, tennis related in the US, school related and just in my career plans as well.

However, Jack also had a wife in the US, which he went on talking about,

Building a life here, getting married here [in the US] has made an enormous impact on my life decisions. My wife has been very supportive, especially now with that transition we're going through in regard to immigration. It is not easy every day, as I am not able to officially work yet, but she has been very supportive, both emotionally and financially.

Natalia mentioned that she had support from her family, but she had received the most support from her teammates and friends, as those are the people with whom student athletes spend the most time. She went on to talk about her experience with her teammates,

I have built a life here, a network of people who support me. All of my other friends like, I mean most of them are in the States (even friends

from back home). Most of them are international and have stayed in the United States. All the teammates except one, I have had throughout four years that went back home, but everybody else stayed so like they were truly supportive. They truly get it what it means being an international in the U.S.

Last, Oliver went to talk about sports as a connecting factor in his marriage that made the wife understand the pressure of remaining in the U.S.

My wife played college sports, and so it continues to be something that we both engage in. We watch on TV, we participate in the odd sporting event or club league thing here too, so it is a part of every, it is a part of my life. Every day of my life. The closest friends that we have in our lives are all former athletes. We have friends who are not former athletes, but sport is still a big part of what we do. We have that sport connection that brings support.

Oliver continued to mention how life here would not have been the same without the support of his friends and a wife:

All of my friends and my wife are here, I felt very happy and in how my life was situated when I graduated and the idea of going back to [home country] and starting again and not knowing whether I care to hang out or try to reconnect with any high school. So just very happy with my wife and who I was, and the life I had at that time.

The role of support structures in participants' lives seemed vital in the decision of international student athletes' intentions to remain in the U.S. postgraduate programme. Most of the participants highlighted support from their families, and some emphasized that most of the decisions were career driven; however, meeting a significant other during that process aided in their decision to stay.

Perseverance

For this study, perseverance is defined as “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest...despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087-1088). The participants noted that starting a career in the U.S. was challenging; however, despite the barriers presented, the participants persevered. Specifically, homesickness and visa issues were prevalent, but despite these difficulties, the participants were determined to have built a life in the U.S. postgraduate programme.

While support structures were deemed to be increasingly influential in the decision for international student-athletes to remain in the U.S. postgraduation, the number of participants indicating that they struggle daily with homesickness is perhaps intuitive. Homesickness exists as a relatively

abstract barrier in international student-athletes' decision to remain in the U.S. Postgraduation, the difficulty of obtaining a work/employment visit was a tangible barrier for many international student-athletes seeking to remain in the U.S. upon graduation. Katie is currently waiting for permanent residency through employment and stated that "immigration is probably the biggest struggle," I would say. Homesickness? Sure, but I am determined to stay, that outweighs being homesick". Moreover, Katie wished that she would have known how hard and long the immigration process is; however, she would not have changed the process. She would have just prepared herself better mentally, as she was determined to stay and prove that all her and her parents' efforts to support her through education are well worth it. Oliver depicted the consistent difficulties with attaining – and maintaining – sponsorship for a work/employment visit:

Just in terms of finding a position in an organization with the ability and capacity to sponsor me through with work Visas was truly hard...I did not find a job straight out of undergrad that would sponsor me through and give me that stability of staying, which was also to be completely honest, the reason why I went back to grade school and got my Masters because that was a way of staying in the US longer, buying myself more time and allowing myself to continue to develop.

Similarly, Martin discussed the role of education in securing his continued matriculation in the U.S. postgraduate programme as well as the difficulty in receiving sponsorship for a work/employment visit:

My goal was to stay in the States so I needed to make sure someone could help me pay for my Visa. So that's it. That was the ultimate goal...After my masters here, I got interviews. I interviewed some of the biggest sports schools and once you talked about Visas like the conversation changed significantly. So yeah, there is a struggle. They will not tell you straight up. In addition, once you talk about Visa, everything is changing, so I guess that is something you live with and understand.

Interestingly, Oliver and Martin were not just two of the many participants who discussed the challenges of securing sponsorship for work/employment visas upon graduation. Given that international student athletes have 90 days to secure a work/employment visa following the expiration of their student visa corresponding with graduation and that work/employment visas can cost employers multiple thousands of dollars when hiring international employees, varying components of the visa process serve as significant stressors for international job seekers and, as indicated by the participants in this exploratory study, can serve directly to their professional detriment. Jacob indicated that receiving immigration paperwork and completing Visa

applications were essential to any action as an international student athlete. Jacob stated that once he received this governmental documentation, “I’ll just be almost like every other American”, alluding to the understood distinction between international and domestic students, athletes, and job seekers.

While international student athlete participants in this study discussed the value of college athletic participation in developing mental toughness and overcoming adversity, the metaphorical *fight* to obtain a work/employment visit as an international job seeker in the U.S. was routinely indicated as the most challenging determinant of participants’ motivations and decisions to remain in the U.S. postgraduate programme. In summary, Natalia stated:

My Visa is going to be the driving factor of my career...I’m just going to be riding the wave again and seeing where the Visa, because that’s going to be the main factor, is going to take me, what job opportunities are going to be there for me.

She later noted in her interview that her company started the process of securing her H-1B (work visa) without telling her that they wanted to surprise her, and she determined through email chains but was happy to determine.

Victoria shared her struggles with securing the work Visa upon graduation as a tennis coach. She shared,

Visa was the challenge when I decided to stay in the U.S. and trying to figure it out. It is way tougher than I thought. When I first applied for O-1 Visa, they did not deny, nor approve, they asked for more evidence. Therefore, I had to keep working with lawyers, collect all the paperwork needed to see if we could make it happen – and then it worked out, I now have a three-year O-1 visa.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has explored the motivations and transition patterns of international student athletes (Jolly et al., 2022; Popp et al., 2009; Ridpath et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore international student athletes’ decision to remain in the U.S. postgraduate programme. The data revealed that the participants chose to remain in the U.S. due to (1) opportunities, (2) influences, and (3) perseverance.

Opportunities

The participants mentioned opportunities as one of the reasons why they chose to remain in the US, viewing the opportunities from personal, professional and social views. While prior research emphasized career opportunities as a driving factor for international students to remain in the U.S. (Ammigan, 2019; Belle et al., 2022; Han et al., 2015; Popp et al., 2009;

Wu et al., 2025), this study revealed that opportunities were viewed from different aspects of life beyond professional aspirations. For some participants, the US offered a sense of belonging, the ability to build a life outside of work, and the ability to build a whole life for themselves.

However, this study expands on the opportunities that college athletics provide these international student athletes, contributes to their personal growth, expands their social circles and provides them with skills that expand beyond their sport careers. These findings support the results of Ridpath et al. (2019), who reported that American universities offer opportunities such as athletic, academic, and social opportunities that are not readily available in their home countries.

While most former international athletes remained in the U.S. owing to the career opportunities available, participants also pointed out an opportunity for a better life or sense of belonging to the U.S. These findings add to the literature, suggesting that the holistic development of college athletics contributes to career development and the decision to remain in the U.S.

Influences

The participants' families, teammates, and coaches influenced them in their decision making. The participants mentioned their experiences of being student athletes and how those experiences combined with the support of their families or friends were important in their decision. Notably, seven of the 13 participants were sports coaches, with three at the intercollegiate level. Therefore, the opportunity of the sports system and what it has to offer in the US allows it to gain the experiences needed for a further career in coaching (Foster & Lally, 2021). While there are coaching opportunities in their home countries, the participants mentioned the resources, opportunities to get promoted, and higher pay in the U.S. One of the participants mentioned that coaching might be a temporary career prior to continuing her higher education.

In addition to professional development, the participants highlighted the critical role of family and friends meant to them during the transition. While previous studies highlighted that a pull from family was the greatest factor in why international students returned to their home countries (Han et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2024), this study revealed that the support international student athletes received from their families and friends encouraged them to stay in the U.S. These findings also align with those of Popp et al. (2020), who described the sense of belonging and support systems within intercollegiate athletics. Some of the participants highlighted that being a part of the team of predominantly international teammates created a shared sense of experience and belonging. It allowed the creation of a deeper connection between the teammates and support for the future. Additionally, meeting a significant other along the way or having strong family support through the process eased the transition and decision of former international athletes to remain in the U.S. These findings aligned with previous research by Weller (2025), who

emphasizes that support from family and social systems allows for a better transition and positive experience.

Perseverance

Each participant emphasized the challenges posed by immigration rules and policies as the most difficult challenges faced. Some are still navigating the complexities of immigration, but most have stated that the benefits of remaining in the U.S. for better opportunities and the future outweigh the complexity of the immigration process. The participants described visa challenges, in line with Solomon et al.'s (2022) work on international student athletes. There is a need for new immigration policies that create a more accessible path for international student athletes to pursue their careers in the U.S.

Despite these challenges, it appears that the opportunities offered by the U.S. for international student athletes outweigh the challenges they might face when deciding to stay. Similarly to Wu et al. (2025), the participants see the benefits of remaining in the U.S. for their future even though the challenges they have encountered. While there are many hurdles for them to overcome, participants highlighted that their athletic experience created discipline and that determination helped them persist through obstacles to immigration (Duckworth et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2025). Moreover, the participants of this study mentioned that personal relationships and support were crucial components of those challenges. While previous studies highlighted university support for international students (Ammigan, 2019; Belle et al., 2022), the findings highlighted the need for more personal networks—friends, family, coaches and mentors—to support them during important decisions in their lives. While institutional support is important and should be incorporated, personal and emotional support play equally important roles in the decision-making process.

Theory

The push–pull model, which is widely used in migration studies, explains how individuals are influenced by factors that push them away from their home countries and pull them toward their destination countries (Lee, 1966). Push factors, such as limited economic opportunities or political instability, may drive international athletes to leave their home countries, whereas pull factors, such as better career prospects, access to resources, and a supportive community, encourage them to remain in the U.S. after graduation. For international athletes, the pull factors often include the professional and personal networks they build through collegiate sports, which provide opportunities for employment, sponsorships, and social integration. Additionally, their experiences in U.S. sports systems, characterized by advanced facilities and coaching, may create a strong attachment to the country, further influencing their decision to stay. By understanding the dynamics of the push–pull model, researchers and

policymakers can better support the transition of international athletes into the US workforce and community life.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the decision of former international student athletes to remain in the U.S. postgraduate program. The participants saw a better value academically, financially, and personally, therefore making a choice to remain in the U.S. The participants provided future international student-athletes with advice and guidance to prepare themselves for the future, specifically advising them to make decisions easily and explore all available options. This research contributes to the understanding of the unique challenges faced by international student athletes and highlights the need for tailored support and guidance in their preparation for life beyond the sport. Implications.

The current study aimed to provide insight into the unique experiences of former international student-athletes who chose to remain in the U.S. postgraduate program. All 13 participants in this study provided their reasoning for their decision-making process and offered advice for other international student-athletes. The findings underscore the critical role that institutional support systems, career guidance, and immigration policies play in shaping international student-athletes' post-graduation decisions. While universities offer programming for student-athletes, none specifically focus on the needs of international student-athletes (Newell, 2015). Currently, institutions offer programming for international students, specifically focusing on the initial adjustment to the US (first-year programming) and guiding international students with limited immigration information (DSO).

These results demonstrated that most student-athletes choose to visit the U.S. due to scholarship opportunities. Therefore, universities and the NCAA are willing to invest in international student athletes, contributing to their education. International student athletes contribute to campus acculturation and athletic departments' overall performance, thereby enhancing competitiveness (Weston, 2006). Although international student athletes may not directly contribute to the university's financial value upon arrival in the U.S., they still contribute to the overall economy by purchasing goods and investing in the community (Belle et al., 2022).

Based on participant insights, U.S. universities and athletic programs can implement the following strategies:

- Starting from developing specialized career support for international student-athletes. Universities should establish career transition programs tailored to international student-athletes, offering mentorship, networking opportunities, and employer connections that facilitate visa sponsorship.
- Enhancing visa and immigration counseling, universities should collaborate with Designated School Officials (DSOs) and legal advisors to provide clearer guidance on employment-based visas

(e.g., H-1B, O-1, OPT extensions) for graduating international student-athletes.

- Expanding institutional partnerships with employers would allow international student-athletes an easier access to the workforce in the U.S. Athletic departments and career centers can build stronger ties with companies and sports organizations that actively hire international talent, thereby increasing job placement rates.
- Advocating for the international student-athletes and make an impact on immigration policies as findings suggest that immigration challenges are the most significant barriers for international student-athletes post-graduation. NCAA and higher education stakeholders should advocate for policy reforms that provide clearer and more accessible visa pathways for international graduates in sports-related fields.

Organically, during each interview, the participants offered their advice, suggestions, and recommendations to future international student athletes migrating to the U.S. and determined their intentions to remain in the U.S. postgraduate programme. Interestingly, this was somewhat of a cathartic experience for many participants, as they engaged in retrospection on their own experiences as international student athletes who had remained in the U.S. upon graduation. We felt that the words of the participants would be helpful in assisting other international student athletes. Mark's recommendations focused on determining your justification for remaining in the U.S. postgraduate programme as an international student athlete:

I would ask yourself 'why do you want to stay in the US?' Even if it is that you just do not want to go back home, that is fine. If that is the case you have to be willing to accept that you're going to have to work...then it is like, 'ok, how can I get someone to sponsor me with a [work/employment] visa?' Which, ridiculously hard...be open to doing more school.

Similarly, Megan provided recommendations regarding the sponsorship process and acquisition of a work/employment visa:

If you apply for a certain visa, try to do it earlier because the earlier you apply, the earlier you will hear the answer, and if it is not going to work out, you can apply for something [else].

Michael emphasized the importance of planning as well but also discussed the value of taking risks and embracing the experience as an international student athlete in the U.S. Perhaps most saliently in depicting advice for future international student-athletes, Michael stated, "take the chance...there's no need to rush back home [postgraduation]." Considering the embedded resiliency among many college athletes

competing in the U.S., such increased resiliency among international student-athletes is indicative of their pretransitional period in which they culturally adjust to the U.S. as well as their posttransitional period in which they face numerous adverse challenges in their ability to remain in the U.S. postgraduate.

Limitations

Several limitations were observed in this study. First, the positionality of the primary researcher should be viewed as a limitation. Although steps were taken to remove bias (e.g., triangulation of coding), the lived experience of the primary researcher could have impacted the results of this study. Given the background of the primary researcher (e.g., former international student athlete, works in higher education in the U.S.), the sampling technique should be viewed as a limitation. Although convenience sampling assisted in obtaining participants, the participants were not from a representative sample of former international student athletes. Although the results may be applicable, they should not be generalizable. Additionally, the participants' ages ranged from 25 to 31 years. Thus, some participants were nearly a decade removed from adapting to life in the U.S. beyond participating in collegiate sports, and their experiences with the decision-making process could have been different on the basis of timing.

Future Research

Although the present study strived to address gaps in the literature, the results are not novel. In fact, the results of this study, specifically the desired career of the participants and the influences on career choices, seem to echo the findings of studies on international student-athletes who are 15 years old (e.g., Popp, 2007; Popp et al., 2009, 2010). Thus, perhaps it is time to consider that qualitative work on the experiences of international student athletes has become saturated. Future work that is quantitative in nature should be considered. This work not only allows for the potential of generalizable findings but also allows for further comparisons between different subpopulations of international athletes. For example, future research should examine various demographic characteristics of international student athletes (race, gender, sport classification, NCAA classification, country, and academic major).

As the experiences of (current/former) international student-athletes appear to be consistent (e.g., Jolly, 2022; Popp et al., 2009, 2010), efforts should perhaps be made to examine athlete development programming that serves this unique population (Navarro, 2013; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The participants stated that their participation in college athletics adequately prepared them to succeed in the U.S. workforce upon graduation. Future research should focus specifically on the career construction efforts of international student athletes. Given that international students have visa restrictions and are unable to work off campus (Solomon et al., 2022),

programming efforts that serve this population should be examined for effectiveness.

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