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THEY ARRIVE, THEY COMPETE, BUT WHAT'S NEXT?: EXPLORING THE TRANSITION OUT OF SPORT EXPERIENCES OF FORMER DIVISION I INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE ATHLETES

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THEY ARRIVE, THEY COMPETE, BUT WHAT'S NEXT?: EXPLORING THE TRANSITION OUT OF SPORT EXPERIENCES OF FORMER DIVISION I INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE ATHLETES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication

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Abstract

International college athletes (ICAs) represent a unique and rapidly growing subpopulation within National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions, especially at the Division I (DI) level. These athletes bring a diverse range of national, cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic identities to United States (U.S.) higher education institutions (HEIs). Their numbers have risen significantly in recent decades, with over 25,000 ICAs currently enrolled in U.S. HEIs (NCAA, 2023). Despite this growth, research on the experiences of ICAs, particularly their career readiness, and transition out of athletics and into the workforce, remains scarce.

This dissertation addresses this critical gap in the existing literature by exploring and investigating the following research questions:

- What are former DI ICAs' career readiness and job search experiences as they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce?
- What kind of resources and support systems are available to ICAs prior to graduation as they prepare to enter the workforce?
- What roles do stakeholders within athletic departments, U.S. HEIs, and national/federal organizations play in ICA experiences during their career preparation and transition out of sport journey?

To address these questions, this qualitative study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 former DI ICAs currently employed in the U.S. or another country. The research and analysis were guided by the theoretical framework of sport labor migration.

Findings from the study revealed concerning trends in the treatment of ICAs. Most ICAs were exploited for their athletic abilities and left unprepared for successful careers beyond athletics. They were treated inequitably by NCAA member institutions, often viewed primarily as sources of athletic capital, economic gain, and global reputation (Bale, 1991). Many ICAs reported a lack of awareness regarding career preparation strategies within the U.S. context. They received limited to no career readiness support at various structural levels, from the NCAA, conference offices, college campuses, and athletic departments either integrating them into existing programs (which may not fully address their unique needs) or failing to provide any specialized programs at all. Additionally, excessive athletic demands and strict time constraints were identified as significant barriers, limiting ICAs' opportunities to engage in academic and professional development programs and workshops. Social capital, in the form of relationships built with other international students, teammates, and networks established during their time in the U.S., emerged as a crucial source of support for ICAs navigating career transitions and workforce entry.

The lack of career readiness support translated into significant challenges during the job search process. Findings revealed that ICAs often faced personal and financial difficulties while navigating outdated and discriminatory visa laws and immigration policies impacting employment opportunities in the U.S. Exclusionary employer practices and anti-immigrant sentiment within U.S. based organizations further complicated their job search experiences.

Additionally, ICAs reported challenges with degree applicability in the U.S. based on their nationality and choice of major, and difficulties with degree transferability upon returning to their home countries. For ICAs who remained in the U.S. and pursued graduate degrees, particularly in STEM fields, a supportive social and professional network proved beneficial in securing employment upon transitioning out of athletics.

Based on these findings, I offer recommendations and suggestions for various stakeholders. These include the NCAA, its member institutions, conference offices, organizations across the U.S., the U.S. federal government as well as ICAs themselves. Overall, the study's aim remains to raise awareness and demand for a more holistic approach that propels ICA career readiness and professional development based on their individual identities and needs, ensuring they are well-equipped for successful careers beyond athletics and empowered to take charge of their own transition out of sport into the workforce journeys. This shift is crucial to move away from a sport and education system that often views and treats ICAs primarily as sport labor migrants, and towards one that provides impactful, useful, integrative, and individualized career readiness and job search support and prepare to ICAs.

Chapter 1: Introduction

International college athletes (ICAs)[1] are an integral part of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and United States (U.S.) higher education institutions (HEIs). ICAs have been consistently recruited by coaches and HEIs since the 1940s (Bale, 1991; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). Today, over 25,000 ICAs compete at U.S. HEIs and make up almost 13% of the entire college athlete (CA) population (NCAA, 2023). More specifically, a majority of these ICAs compete at DI HEIs that often provide a higher number of athletic scholarships, feature world-class athletic facilities, and engage in elite-level athletic competitions (Bale, 1991; Jara, 2015; NCAA, 2023). Across DI HEIs, ICAs are sources of athletic labor, intellectual, economic (tuition, fees, and more) and athletic capital, entertainment, revenue, and cultural and national diversity in HEIs and beyond (Bale, 1991; Chelladurai & Riemar, 1997; Holman, 2007; Maguire, 1996, 2004; Weston, 2006).

ICAs are a unique population who are both international students and college athletes (CAs). They have distinct national, cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic identities (Lee & Opio, 2011; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). Still, most scholars and practitioners within HEIs view ICAs as a monolith (Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Foo et al., 2022; Frawley, 2015; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; Streno et al., 2020), which is problematic. ICAs are highly athletically talented and often attend U.S. HEIs as its unique intercollegiate athletics model allows them to simultaneously train, compete, and earn a college degree (Bale, 1991; Frawley, 2015; Hong, 2018; Love & Kim, 2011; Pierce et al, 2011). Such a model does not exist in countries around the world. Thus, NCAA member institutions lure these individuals with their world-class

[1] Following Sack and Staurowsky (1998) and Sethi et al. (2022), I use the term "college athlete" and "ICA" rather than "student-athlete" and "ISA" because the NCAA invented and enforces the usage of the latter term to limit athlete compensation.

infrastructure, facilities, coaching standards, sports medicine, and scholarship opportunities to leave their family, home, friends, culture, and country to pursue an elite athletic and academic experience in the U.S. (Bale, 1987; Hong, 2018; Love & Kim, 2011). ICAs view this opportunity as a great way to gain athletic prowess and prepare for professional athletic endeavors and/or to continue playing elite-level sports while pursuing academic excellence to prepare for careers in the workforce (Popp et al., 2009).

ICAs have been migrating to the U.S. since the 1940s, however even to this day, athletic departments are unable to fairly cater to this population (Lee & Opio, 2011; Newell, 2015; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; Streno et al., 2020). Coaches and HEIs do not provide them with a holistic collegiate experience as often promised to ICAs during their recruitment phase (Bale, 1991; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). Instead, they continue to be used as bodies of athletic labor—sport labor migrants—to help college sports teams build their confidence, gain national and international reputation, and win championships (Bale, 1991; Love & Kim, 2018; Weston, 2006). Despite being heavily recruited for their athletic prowess, ICAs are often left unprepared for life after graduation and the transition into the workforce (Bale, 1991; Pierce et al., 2011). They receive little to no career readiness training and are not integrated into already existing professional development programs hosted by HEIs and the NCAA (Newell, 2015; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024) Lastly, even scholars continue to ignore this population within their discussion of CAs and for those who do, they often frame this population as a homogenous group (Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Foo et al., 2022; Frawley, 2015; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; Streno et al., 2022). This omission further perpetuates the lack of awareness or ignorance towards this population's existence and importance as well as their unique identities and needs.

Population of Study: Former Division I International College Athletes in the Workforce

This study focused on ICAs from DI HEIs since DI is the most competitive division within the NCAA member institutions and provides the largest number of athletic scholarships which is a major contributing factor in ICAs' decision to migrate to the U.S. (Bale, 1987; Popp et al., 2011). Currently, 15,484 ICAs are enrolled at DI HEIs as compared to 8,542 enrolled at DII HEIs (NCAA, 2023). Many of these ICAs at DI HEIs are highly ranked in their home countries and choose to pursue DI intercollegiate athletics as a steppingstone to a professional sports career (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2011). They are seen as valuable by coaches at DI HEIs for their ability to enhance their athletic programs' competitiveness within and beyond conferences (Weston, 2006). Other ICAs view the intercollegiate athletics experience as an option to pursue a world-class degree and build a better life (upward social mobility of the individual as well as of the family) while also getting the opportunity to pursue their passion and love for their respective sport (Beamon, 2008; Bista & Gaulee, 2017).

This study strategically focused on *former* DI ICAs who are currently employed. Engaging with this specific population offered a longitudinal benefit: understanding ICAs' experiences both during and after their college careers. Former ICAs also provided valuable insights into their career readiness and job search experiences, unlike current ICAs who may not have reached that stage. Additionally, research suggests that former athletes often develop a more critical perspective on their athletic experiences after their careers end (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). Therefore, former DI ICAs possessed unique qualifications. They had firsthand experiences as elite athletes from their home countries, navigated career readiness support systems within and beyond athletic departments, and currently hold positions in the workforce. This professional experience allowed them to reflect on their journeys with a critical lens,

providing invaluable perspectives on their career preparedness, job search struggles, and overall transition out of athletics.

Research Problem(s)

The NCAA proudly associates itself with the founding values of amateurism and putting the student in "student-athlete" first (Gayles et al., 2022; Kaburakis, 2007; Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005). However, it is well known that this multi-billion-dollar enterprise does not uphold its values, which often prevents academic growth and athlete compensation (Milford & Smith, 2020; Singer, 2016). It continues to mistreat CAs, especially those of color, as bodies of labor for athletic gain (Cooper, 2009, 2012; Gayles et al., 2022; Hawkins, 1999, 2010; Keaton & Cooper, 2022; McCormick & McCormick, 2012; Ortega, 2021). ICAs are in a similar situation as they are recruited for their athletic abilities but often the NCAA, DI HEIs, and its support staff are ignorant or underprepared to cater to the unique needs of this population (Bale, 1991; Lee & Opio, 2011; Newell, 2015; Popp et al., 2011; Watson, 2005). Due to the high emphasis on athletics and the demands that follow their career aspirations and goals must take a back seat. Additionally, U.S. HEIs, athletics departments, and their stakeholders do not provide sufficient and appropriate career readiness exposure and training and often have poor support services and programming initiatives, which often implement a 'one size fits all' approach (Trendafilova et al., 2010). This leaves ICAs unaware, unsure, and unprepared about their post-athletic professional endeavors as they get closer to graduation.

While scholars discuss career readiness and transition out of sport/HEIs within the international student (IS) and CA literature (Ghosh et al., 2007; Han et al., 2022; NCAA, 2020; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007), only a handful of scholars in the ICA literature do the same. Newell (2015) discusses the lack of individualized advising that leaves ICAs uninformed, and others

state the need for ICA-specific career readiness work to be done (Carodine et al., 2001; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Popp et al., 2011; Watson, 2005). Foster and Lally (2021) explored the long-term impact of intercollegiate athletics on former ICAs. They identified both positive outcomes, such as enhanced time management skills and professional connections within sports, and negative consequences. A lack of career readiness programming resulted in insufficient job search preparation, and a limited awareness of degree transfer options created challenges for ICAs returning home. Consequently, athletic departments and their staff often left ICAs inadequately equipped to pursue career opportunities outside of athletics. Beyond the limited exploration by Foster and Lally (2021), there remains a significant gap in research and engagement with former Division I ICAs. Neither scholars nor the NCAA have extensively examined ICAs' experiences and challenges regarding career readiness and transition out of sport. Understanding this phase of an ICA's journey can help raise awareness, educate practitioners, and inform best practices for working with this population. It can also guide future ICAs by providing valuable insights into navigating this unique terrain.

IS and CA literature addresses some of the distinct identities present within their population—Black CAs, Black ISs, Asian ISs, Chinese students, Indian students, etc. However, the ICA literature, except for a few studies (Lee & Opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2010; Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024), tends to portray them as homogenous despite IS literature suggesting distinctions between ISs based on country of origin (Daraz, 2023; Lee, 2007, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). Furthermore, visa and immigration challenges based on ICA identities are rarely discussed in ICA literature (Lee & Opio, 2011) as compared to IS literature (Daraz, 2023; Lee, 2007, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007) where the unique immigration challenges for those on F-I (IS visa) are discussed. So far, only Lee and Opio (2011)

have discussed the presence of neo-racism, discrimination, and racism based on one's nationality, culture, and religion in ICA experiences when applying for visas.

Compared to research on ISs and domestic college athletes (DCAs), there is a significant gap in research examining the impact of social and cultural capital on ICAs' post-graduation outcomes. This includes understanding the roles various stakeholders play in supporting ICAs, beyond academic advisors (Newell, 2015). These stakeholders include the NCAA, DI HEIs, college coaches, athlete wellbeing and development staff, student affairs professionals, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the U.S. federal government.

The harm perpetuated by failing to consider the unique identities and challenges of ICAs is further compounded in the context of career readiness. Furthermore, a lack of awareness or ignorance displayed by those responsible for recruiting ICAs can hinder their ability to effectively guide and serve them. Ultimately, this combination of limited research and inadequate support negatively impacts the holistic experience of ICAs within DI HEIs, particularly their preparedness and confidence as they enter the workforce.

ICAs leave their home, family, friends, country, culture to pursue a better life, and gain academic and athletic excellence, a promise made by the NCAA, its member institutions, and coaches, which is often not fulfilled (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Renick, 1974). Instead, ICAs are expected to assimilate into U.S. college culture, engage in rigorous practice and competition schedules, and excel both academically and athletically (Bale, 1991; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). Such an experience only benefits HEIs in the long run as they can use an ICA's athletic prowess as well as their image to win championships, gain global recognition, and potentially build long-lasting recruiting pipelines. Current research engages with ICA transition to college and on-campus experiences like homesickness, isolation, culture shock, neo-racism and discrimination,

high pressure and expectations to perform, emotional and psychological issues, anxiety due to uncertainty about scholarships, financial issues, interrogative visa, and immigration experiences, amateurism, being forced into majors not aligning with career aspirations to stay eligible, lack of knowledge about career readiness, and the U.S. workforce and hiring processes (Abbey-Pinegar, 2010; Baghurst et al., 2018; Carodine et al., 2001; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Frawley, 2015; Kaburakis, 2007; Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005; Lee & Opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; Rodriguez, 2014; Sato et al., 2018; Streno et al., 2020; Watson, 2005). However, little to none critically address the retention, career readiness, and transition out of sport into the workforce experiences of ICAs.

ICAs are often provided little to no support from HEI staff about professional development and workforce opportunities, leaving the majority uninformed about future career pathways (Pierce al., 2011; Popp et al., 2010) even after their commitments and sacrifices to invest in the U.S. economy and pour into U.S. nationalism through athletic contributions (Sethi et al., 2022). More specifically, no attention is paid to ICAs' visa complexities and how that can force their exit from the U.S. shortly after graduation, leaving many mentally and emotionally disturbed, and personally and professionally uncertain of their lives ahead. This unfair and inequitable environment towards ICAs further perpetuates how recruiting ICAs, sport laborers to U.S. HEIs, is key to the NCAA and its member institutions. However, providing career readiness support that ensures a holistic experience remains ignored. This leaves ICAs who choose to pursue professional careers in the workforce unprepared and lost in this new phase of life. Additionally, ICAs experience exclusionary and discriminatory immigration policies and anti-immigrant organizations and employers making it extremely challenging for ICAs to flourish in

the U.S. both during and after college (Lee & Opio, 2011; Sethi et al., 2022). This places the onus on ICAs and their social and cultural capital to navigate these challenging environments, especially life beyond college, while they continue to be sport labor migrants for DI HEIs without getting much in return (Sethi et al., 2022).

Significance of Study

Today's job market is more competitive than ever, and individuals must place great emphasis on engaging in career readiness programming and professional development opportunities during college to be successful in the workforce (Savickas, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009). It is well known that less than two percent of CAs make the transition to compete in professional sports, leaving 98% of this population with the option to pursue a professional career in the workforce (NCAA, 2020). Therefore, the NCAA and DI HEIs must invest in ICA career readiness and life after sport resources like career exploration workshops, professional development and networking events, inclusive career fairs, and alumni engagements within and outside the walls of the institution. Given the ample resources available at elite DI institutions, choices about which resources athletes receive remain a reflection of institutional priorities and values. Thus, in this study, I use sport labor migration (Bale, 1991; Maguire, 1996, 2004; Weston, 2006) as a theoretical framework to address why such career readiness programmatic efforts and navigating life after sport-related education efforts are needed more than ever to better center and support ICAs instead of only viewing and treating them as commodities beneficial to U.S. HEIs and athletic departments for athletic and material gain.

While working to address ICA exploitation, providing policy and practice suggestions, and advocating for its implementation, this study also contributes to the limited amount of literature that addresses the experiences of ICAs. It specifically lays the groundwork for further

exploration of the importance of ICA career readiness and life after sport experiences, especially as it pertains to their job search phase. Additionally, it sheds light on the experiences and challenges that ICAs face when they prepare to transition out of sport and pursue professional careers in the workforce. Raising awareness about the unique challenges ICAs face during their transition out of athletics will educate the NCAA, coaches, administrators, HEI staff, and associated support offices. Building this knowledge can help these individuals and organizations work more effectively with this population, understand their distinct identities, and provide targeted resources and support programs to facilitate a smooth transition and successful career path, whether in the U.S. or another country.

Most importantly, this work aims to influence practice and policy changes, not just within individual institutions but also at the federal level. Specifically, through this work, I advocate for reforms in outdated visa laws, immigration policies, and unfair Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies. These reforms are essential to ensure ICAs are included and treated equitably, rather than exploited, in exchange for their contributions to building U.S. national pride and institutional branding through college sports. Findings and implications from this study will raise awareness, educate, provide guidance, and suggest best practices for enhancing ICA career readiness and transition out of sport experiences.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research study is to explore, understand, and investigate former DI ICAs' career readiness and transition out of sport experiences, especially as they navigated the job market in the U.S. or another country. To do so, the study is framed and guided based on the following research questions:

RQ 1 – What are former DI ICAs' career readiness and job search experiences as they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce?

RQ 2 – What kind of resources and support systems are available to ICAs prior to graduation as they prepare to enter the workforce?

RQ 3 – What roles do stakeholders within athletic departments, U.S. HEIs, and national/federal organizations play in ICA experiences during their career preparation and transition out of sport journey?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter delves into the limited existing literature specifically focused on international college athletes (ICAs), while also drawing insights from relevant college athlete (CA) and international student (IS) research. Current college athlete research primarily focuses on the domestic college athlete and their experiences. By doing so, I situate ICAs as a unique population navigating a complex intersection of identities and experiences: athlete, student, and immigrant. This multifaceted reality shapes their journey to and through U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs), where they compete, pursue degrees, and face intricate political landscapes surrounding immigration policies and visa regulations that significantly impact their lives and well-being. Beyond the inherent challenges of balancing student and athlete roles, ICAs encounter additional restrictions and hurdles due to their non-U.S. citizenship status. While navigating these uncertainties and challenges during their transition to and time within U.S. HEIs, they further face distinct obstacles as they approach graduation and prepare to enter the workforce—a crucial aspect of their lives largely overlooked in current literature. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all ISs, including ICAs, face the same challenges and navigate similar waters in the U.S. (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Their experiences are often distinct based on their country of origin, and their religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural identity (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024).

Following a review of relevant literature on ISs, CAs, and specifically ICAs, this chapter introduces the theoretical framework chosen for this study: sport labor migration (Bale, 1991; Maguire, 1996, 2004; Pierce et al., 2010; Weston, 2006). This framework allows me to analyze ICAs' experiences within U.S. HEIs from a critical perspective. By utilizing the sport labor migration framework, ICAs are positioned as a minoritized population within U.S. HEIs. This

perspective highlights the possibility that ICAs are viewed and utilized primarily as athletic labor (Bale, 1991; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). This potentially leads to experiences of discrimination, unequal treatment, and inadequate preparation for life after college athletics. This chapter concludes by identifying gaps and inequities within the current literature on ICAs. My research aims to address these gaps by offering a critical and intentional contribution to the existing knowledge base, specifically concerning the career readiness and post-athletic career transitions of ICAs.

International Students in U.S. Higher Education Institutions

ISs are an integral part of U.S. HEIs and are omnipresent across campuses. They are unique individuals with distinct national, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and gender identities (Lee, 2006, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sethi et al, 2022). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) refers to ISs as non-immigrants whose primary purpose is to complete an academic or vocational course of study at a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certified school or program (SEVP, 2019). The U.S. is well known as a global educational powerhouse and the largest recruiter of ISs (Bohm et al., 2002; Fischer, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). ISs, amongst many others, see the U.S. as a land of freedom, great lifestyle, and professional growth due to the presence of immense career opportunities along with immense potential for personal growth (Bound et al., 2021; Demirci, 2019; Lee, 2007).

The most recent data for the academic year 2022-2023 regarding ISs shows that 1,057,188 ISs are enrolled in U.S. HEIs (IEE Open Doors, 2023). The numbers have grown significantly from 1949 when over 200,000 ISs were enrolled (Bound et al., 2021). ISs contributed $40.1 billion to the U.S. education system, especially public research universities,

during the 2022-2023 academic year out of which undergraduates paid almost 65% of their tuition and fees from personal funds or home country resources (Esaki-Smith, 2023).

Some research within the IS literature specifies the importance of continent/region/country of origin and acknowledges the vast number of differences in each of these individuals and their national identities (Lee, 2006, 2010, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; White, 2022). However, they are often treated as a monolith within HEIs and by scholars in sport research (Daraz, 2023; Demirci, 2019; Han et al., 2022; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017; Urias & Yeakey, 2009; Yao, 2015). White (2022) states that 13% of all Black students in U.S. HEIs are ISs. Thus, it is important to make distinctions based on nationality and region of residence and not address students as a homogenous group based on the color of their skin. In his study, 40,000 ISs from the Sub-Saharan region of Africa—east, central, south, and West Africa had great differences in cultural identities but were still viewed as African in the U.S. Uzoigwe (2008) has shown that students from all regions and nations of Africa dislike being treated as a monolith and like to identify with their nationalistic identity such as being Kenyan, South African, Nigerian, etc. since their countries, its cultures, traditions, practices and life overall is very different. Treating this population as a homogenous group takes away from their identity and the unique needs and challenges that come with it.

Research has also shown that ISs have a huge impact within and outside the walls of U.S. HEIs; they diversify college campuses and the surrounding communities (Lee, 2007, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; White, 2022; Yao & Viggiano, 2019;), provide immense financial gains to the U.S. economy (Bale, 1991; Cantwell, 2019; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Urias & Yeakey, 2009; Yao,

2015), produce great amount of athletic and intellectual gain for U.S. HEIs and the U.S. workforce (Bale, 1991; Bound et al., 2021; Demirci, 2019; Love & Kim, 2011; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Weston, 2006; Zillmer, et al., 2015), are a great marketing resource for HEIs and their reputation across the world (Choudaha, 2011; Fischer, 2011; Lewin, 2008; Yao & Viggiano, 2019), and are often the reason behind new innovations and discoveries in the STEM fields (Bound et al, 2021; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Yao & Viggiano, 2019; White, 2022). This shows how it is not only the ISs who benefit from a U.S. education but also the U.S. who greatly benefits from this population's presence on their college campuses as well as in the U.S. workforce. Overall, ISs are critical for the growth of U.S. HEIs, it's global branding, and the U.S. economy and must be welcomed, included, and treated equitably and fairly (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

Motivation and Enrollment Patterns

The U.S. has become a leading destination for ISs (Lee, 2010; Yao & Viggiano, 2019). The reason why ISs leave their home countries and come to study in the U.S. is complex and understudied (Lee, 2008). A general trend in the research, however, shows how students from less developed countries migrate to more developed ones (Altbach, 1998; Chen & Barnett, 2000; Weiler, 1984). Other scholars and practitioners discuss different factors for transition such as lack of resources and infrastructure and reputable, competitive, and highly developed programs of education in their home country (Lee, 2008). According to Lee (2008), most ISs were neither familiar with campus nor visited HEIs. Instead, many only focused on the reputation and ranking of the HEIs. She emphasized the diversity present within the sample population and acknowledged how the process and reason for migration were different for many based on their country/region of origin. For example, those from East Asia laid greater emphasis on the

reputation and ranking of the school instead of IS inclusiveness in HEIs. Additionally, social, and cultural capital played a role in the decision-making ability of ISs coming to study in the U.S. An Indian student in Lee (2008) shared he had no internet access in his hometown and had to rely solely on his Indian professor's opinion to come to the U.S. Lee (2008) found that culturally diverse campus, lower tuition rates in some U.S. HEIs as compared to others, special programs of interest not available in other countries are some of the reasons why ISs pursue academic paths in the U.S. Additionally, they apply to support their families hope for a better life and the possibility of assistantships offered for higher education. Other reasons that led ISs to U.S. HEIs included encouragement and guidance from friends, school, and private study abroad counselors, and information sources like brochures and advertisements shared by institutions (Lee, 2008). Thus, providing evidence regarding how the U.S. is often seen as an educational superpower that attracts ISs.

Lee and Rice (2007) also suggest that while research about college admissions and access in the U.S. is centered on gender, race, social class, and high school context, enrollment, and admission criteria for ISs are quite different than those of domestic students. Examples include navigating high international student fees, addressing political concerns between countries, considering the difference in economies, addressing long-term economic benefits of the U.S. workforce, culturally appropriate housing and food accommodations, and inclusive and supportive campus community and staff (Grey, 2002; Lee, 2008; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002). These factors become crucial aspects to consider for ISs once they begin to plan their higher education journey to the U.S. as it can significantly impact their experiences in a new country.

Impact on U.S. Higher Education Institutions

International students (ISs) often face challenges in being recognized positively within U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs). Despite their crucial roles as learners and contributors to the educational environment for domestic students (DSs), ISs may need to frequently justify their presence (Paige, 1990). ISs add a great amount of linguistic and cultural diversity, cultural richness, and wealth within classrooms, campus, and the surrounding communities (Chow, 2021; Lee, 2007, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). They add diverse perspectives and broaden cultural knowledge in classroom discussions pushing DSs to think critically (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). DSs can gain cross-cultural knowledge and wisdom from ISs (Paige, 1990), all by sitting in a classroom in their home country. In addition, ISs bring expertise from their home countries in STEM fields that further enhances the competitive academic environments in the U.S. and promotes the U.S. higher education model in the global education market (Altbach, 1989; Barber & Morgan, 1987; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). However, faculty, staff, and administrators know little about this population and overlook their significance in enriching the overall campus environment (Chow, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007; Pitre, 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Urias & Yeakey, 2009).

As sources of intellectual and physical labor, ISs are expected to handle high teaching assistant (TA) course loads, low salaries, work in research labs, become world-class faculty members, possess specialized skills in the workforce and so much more (Bound et al., 2021; Gaule & Piacentini, 2013; Lee, 2010). For example, Chinese graduate students often do the heavy lifting and are viewed as the "workhorse of the modern laboratory" (Gaule & Piacentini, 2013, p. 700). Research shows that Chinese graduate students tend to outperform non-Chinese students and have an amplified presence when it comes to scientific productivity (Gaule &

Piacentini, 2013). According to Reisberg (2012), efforts made to recruit IS seemed "…a lot like a business transaction with the expectation of a good ROI (return on investment)" (para., 3). They are known as cheap labor for HEIs and make up one of the highest numbers of competent TAs (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This, again, demonstrates the need for and importance of acknowledging a breakdown between studied IS demographics.

In the workforce, several studies have discussed the role of ISs and immigrants in STEM fields, including elite spaces and titles like the National Academy of Sciences, Nobel prize receipts, and authorship of very highly cited papers, world-famous doctors, leaders, CEOs, and scientists (Chellaraj et al., 2008; Black & Stephan, 2010; Gaulé & Piacentini, 2013; Stuen et al., 2012). Thus, ISs act as brand ambassadors for U.S. HEIs. They play critical roles in enhancing technology and entrepreneurship (Anderson & Platzer, 2006; Saxenian, 2000; Wadhwa et al. 2009). Additionally, they are sources of soft power to the U.S. as a means of "garnering diversity, contributing to foreign policy, producing knowledge, and generating economic gains" (Yao & Viggiano, 2019, p.82). However, these contributions are not acknowledged enough in the literature. Regardless of such contributions that benefit the U.S. and its citizens within and beyond the walls of the academy, ISs continue to be excluded and exploited.

ISs financial contributions are commonly addressed in the literature. They continue to be lucrative for HEIs, U.S. corporate organizations, and the overall U.S. economy. In terms of financial benefits, ISs have contributed over $40 billion to the U.S. economy for the 2023 academic year and the creation and support of 368,333 jobs (Esaki-Smith, 2023). They pour into the U.S. economy by investing in the stock market and engage in spending by paying for housing, meals (food and drinks), insurance, and transportation at the bare minimum (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009). In addition, according to a study from the National Foundation for American

Policy, nearly one-quarter of the founders of U.S. startup companies worth $1 billion or more were the first ISs in the U.S. (Anderson, 2018). This demonstrates how ISs add to the economic and intellectual gain, innovation, and diversity of the U.S (Chow, 2021; Lee, 2007, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007) and help it achieve brain gain whereas the startup founders' nations experience brain drain (Bale, 1991; Bound et al., 2021). However, current research continues to consistently address the material benefits this population provides to the U.S. without laying much emphasis on how ISs continue to be underserved and mistreated regardless of all their contributions. In portraying and discussing ISs as commodities, it places their primary value on the money they bring to the U.S.

Brief Historical Context: Immigration Policies and Visa Challenges

The U.S. immigration law has been founded on restrictive policies that privilege White and affluent immigrants (Gardner, 2009; King, 2000; Sethi et al., 2022; Skiba, 2012), and no meaningful immigration reforms have occurred since 1965 (South American Digital Archive, 2015). However, even though race-based immigration laws were finally overturned in 1965, the impetus for discriminatory and racist nationalism still exists in immigration policy and visa laws (Skiba, 2012). This is often seen through the implantation of restrictive and outdated F-1 visa programs. Nationality, language, religion, and ethnicity are still major factors influencing discriminatory policies. For example, President Trump's Executive Order 13769 in 2017 temporarily banned immigrants from seven predominately Muslim countries from entering the U.S. (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Before this ban, in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, since one of the 19 hijackers had entered the U.S. on a student visa, President Bush passed the Patriot Act, which called for an end to the 'abuse of the student visas' (U.S. Office of the President, 2001, para.12). This led to changes in immigration policy which severely impacted

ISs coming to/already in the U.S. The DHS was made responsible for managing and leading counterterrorism efforts, administration, and enforcement of immigration laws, and protecting the borders. This transition was meant to portray that the issuance of these student visas was a matter of national security concern and needed to be highly regulated (Urias & Yeakey, 2009). Some even argue that it prevented scholars and students from entering and building professional careers in the U.S. (Witt, 2008). In 1993 after the World Trade Center bombing, President Clinton introduced mandates on ISs to protect national security (Ruiz, 2014). Even today, exclusionary standards like demanding F-1 visa holders (including all ISs) 'must be proficient in English' (USCIS, 2020, para. 2) even though the U.S. has no official language (Kaur, 2018). Lastly, after knowing that ISs come to the U.S. on academic and athletic scholarships, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) requires ISs/their families to "have sufficient funds available for self-support" throughout their academic career even though they can provide financial aid paperwork to immigration/visa officers (para. 2). These actions negatively impact the present and future of all ISs. Several policy changes over time have led to additional restrictions, consistent questioning of integrity and identity, and increased instances of neo-racism. These restrictions produce fear and discomfort in the lives of young individuals who pursue higher education in the U.S. hoping to make a better living—something that might not be possible in lower-resourced nations and by families across the world (Altbach, 1998; Chen & Barnett, 2000; Lee, 2008; Weiler, 1984).

Employment Challenges: Visa Barriers Beyond the Classroom

All ISs who enroll in full-time academic programs at accredited HEIs need an F-1 visa. (Study in the States, 2024). To maintain their legal status, they must maintain a full course load and only engage in work opportunities on campus for no more than 20 hours a week during

academic terms (Urias & Yeakey, 2009). However, there are a few exceptions to this on-campus employment rule: ISs can participate in Curricular Practical Training (CPT) during college and Optional Practical Training (OPT) after college. In both programs, ISs can work off-campus in alignment with their academic major. Each program and approval of paperwork policies are laden with bureaucracy, requiring layers of institutional approvals (Sethi et al. 2022). Furthermore, additional complexities exist to stay in compliance with these nuanced yet still restrictive opportunities available to ISs. For example, if the CPT period is exhausted, and used for over 12 months, ISs would immediately be deemed ineligible for OPT, which allows them to work for one year after graduation (USCIS, 2020). While U.S. tax laws prohibit ISs from earning *active* income (except for limited on-campus employment, OPT, and CPT), the law permits passive income streams, such as earnings that require no direct action like interest on savings accounts or stock market profits. Earning passive income presupposes the possession of capital and favors those with intergenerational wealth (Sethi et al., 2022). While complex to navigate, ISS must stay in compliance with these rules to prevent deportation.

The U.S. has been in a "global bidding war" for talented ISs, particularly in the STEM fields for decades (Brief for ACE et al., 2018, p. 17). While immigration policies are very restrictive, the U.S. has always attracted ISs in STEM-related majors and the workforce. They help make the U.S. a world leader in technology and innovation (Altbach,1998; Brief for ACE et al., 2018; Bound et al., 2021; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). These recruitment efforts, even amid the pandemic, demonstrate how these actions are rooted in interest convergence, a term coined by Bell (1980) since they fear losing out on ISs as sources of economic and intellectual gain. This recruitment of ISs does not solely benefit the students from countries around the world. Instead, the U.S.'s ability to extract such intellectual minds from their home country to the U.S.

provides this country a great advantage over other powerful and flourishing nations. Thus, continuing to recruit these individuals leads to consistent revenue generation, successful running of the U.S. higher education business model, and later the innovative and intellectual spaces in the workforce, across the U.S.

Upon completion of the one-year OPT, the U.S. favors STEM majors, again, for its gain and provides ISs in STEM with an additional two years of OPT as compared to non-STEM majors. Once ISs are on an OPT, they are eligible to apply for a work visa known as H-1B, "the most popular work visa category for the employment of college-educated foreign workers" (Demirci, 2019, p. 1372). This work visa is restrictive as it is capped at 65,000 per year for all countries of origin except for those from Canada, Mexico, Chile, Singapore, and Australia and individuals who work in HEIs and the non-profit sector (Bound et al., 2021). The H-1B requires an employer application and sponsorship and "theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge and attainment of a bachelor's or higher, or its equivalent" (Bound et al., 2021, p. 169). Thus, adding qualification restrictions to make it harder for immigrants to work and reside in the U.S. The H-1B visa gives immigrants the authorization to work in the U.S. for up to three years with the potential for a three-year extension (Demirci, 2019). Again, the restriction on this visa uniquely impacts ISs from different nations and must be addressed accordingly. However, while challenges experienced by ICAs are often centered around visa and immigration, they also go well beyond this space. In the next section, I will delve deeper into literature that specifically gives voice to ISs and addresses their major concerns and experiences within U.S. HEIs.

Additional Challenges Faced by International Students

ISs experience a myriad of challenges upon entering a new country—learning about a new culture, adjusting to a new education and workforce system, making new friends; in essence, re-establishing a new life from scratch often, without the support any family and friends in close physical proximity (Han et al., 2022; Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Urias & Yeakey, 2009). Based on the acculturation models (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2006; Berry, 2005, 2006; Safdar et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2001) it is understood that ISs experience considerable life changes. Such changes lead to challenges for many ISs. Throughout this section, I address challenges faced by ISs and address the most concerning ones in detail as it relates to my study.

Language Barriers. Language barriers are the most challenging stressor for ISs to navigate in U.S. HEIs (Chen, 1999; Lee, 2007; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli et al., 2001; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). However, for some students from many countries around the globe, English is also their first language. It is important to acknowledge that not all ISs experience similar linguistic challenges. But, for those whose second language is English or who have never communicated in English in their home countries, difficulty communicating in academic and social settings is common. Academically, this impacts their performance in the classroom due to their under preparedness to write and read in English (Daraz, 2023; White, 2022). Socially, it hinders their ability to build friendships and relationships with those in the community, further isolating these students in addition to the already high levels of isolation experienced by this population. This trickles down to impact their mental health, often leading to depression and loss of sense of self (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Educational Challenges. Faculty teaching styles in HEIs play a huge role in ISs' adjustment to the U.S. education model (Aubrey, 1991; Liberman, 1994; Misra et al., 2003). Often, ISs from certain countries in Asia find it difficult to adapt to the teaching styles, critical thinking, and practical application of concepts as opposed to rote learning, which is often emphasized in their home countries (Liberman, 1994). Additionally, Asian students found it hard to engage in informal conversations with faculty members and felt discomfort with the lack of respect shown to faculty by domestic students (Liberman, 1994). While ISs encounter difficulty adjusting to new academic environments, a lack of academic support and academic advising further hinders their academic experiences. Often, advisors and those supporting ISs lack cultural and communication awareness regarding engaging with and serving this population (Clark & Kalionzes, 2008; Daraz, 2023). For many who successfully navigate the education model, social and cultural capital matter significantly like access to advice and roadmaps from friends and career counselors (Lee, 2008). Therefore, even after paying millions of dollars, support and guidance provided to ISs are negligible who nevertheless continue to be 'cash cows', viewed as commodities of immense monetary gain, as well as sources of intellectual capital for U.S. HEIs (Cantwell, 2019; Choudaha, 2017).

Social and Cultural Challenges. Current research lays great emphasis on ISs' acculturation, integration, and assimilation into U.S. HEIs (Gardner, 2009; King, 2000; Pericak et al., 2023; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024; Skiba, 2012; Tierney, 1992; Yao, 2015). However, scholars interchangeably use the terms assimilation and integration with "great imprecision" (Hutnik, 1986, p.151). Assimilation requires no change or accommodation by the majority group and "imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity" (Alba & Nee, 2014, p. 827; Gordon, 1964; Tierney, 1992; Yao,

2015). However, integration expects the dominant group to learn from and accommodate the minority group (Hutnik, 1986). For example, instead of expecting an IS to already know English, providing them opportunities to engage in ELS courses can be integrative and supportive (Cantwell, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

ISs, while adjusting to the transition of moving to a new country, experience culture shock, loneliness, and homesickness which further leads to isolation, anxiety, and depression (Yeh & Inose, 2003). It also leads to inability to engage in social settings, make friends, and enjoy a holistic collegiate life during their stay in the U.S. (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Often, this requires them to seek help and see mental health practitioners. However due to the stigma attached to mental health services in certain countries and the lack of cultural awareness by mental health practitioners, many do not consult these professionals (Frawley, 2015). This negatively impacts their academic performance and emotional and psychological well-being (Mori, 2000). Traveling to a new country takes ISs away from their comfort zone. They meet new people, must adjust to new kinds of lifestyles and communication styles, and feel a loss of sense of self due to the distance that exists between their new and old home (Bradley, 2000). Thus, being expected to adjust to using local transportation, eating dorm and café food, buying one's own groceries, and being self-independent for the first time poses a lot of 'firsts' and 'new' in the lives of ISs. Those in positions of support and power need to understand the uniqueness of this population and cater to their needs accordingly (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Discrimination, Neo-Racism, and Anti-Immigrant Environments. Whether or not ISs face discrimination depends on a lot of factors—their accents and language variations, lack of fluency in English, the color of their skin, religious identity, national identity, regional identity, cultural identity, and their social class (Lee, 2007, 2016; Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi & Hextrum,

2024). Several studies have shown how ISs from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East reported higher levels of discrimination as compared to European ISs (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) interviewed 24 students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, and Latin America who endured far greater difficulties in U.S. institutions than students from Canada, New Zealand, and Europe. They reported discrimination in the form of anti-immigrant verbal exchanges when seeking jobs, and many were also physically attacked. Such discrimination based on one's national and cultural identity, Lee and Rice (2007) defined as neo-racism, an arm of racism. Neo-racism, or discrimination based on nationality, culture, and/or religion, is endemic to higher education (Hervik, 2004). It is discrimination not only solely based on biological differences but also based on one's national and cultural identity (Lee, 2007). However, it is important to acknowledge that just like racism, neo-racism is not experienced by all ISs. Current immigration policies target ISs from certain countries when attempting to obtain student visas (Lee & Rice, 2007). For example, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, students from the Middle East are often denied visas or detained at U.S. airports due to the neo-racist association between Muslims and terrorism (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Behind these racist words and actions lie notions of national and cultural superiority. These words and actions come in the form of "insulting jokes and statements about their home country, particularly third world countries perceived as lacking basic resources—such as running water and adequate textbooks" (Lee, 2006, p. 4). Such demeaning and insulting remarks were not only made by students but also by staff and administrators within U.S. HEIs. In Lee's (2006) study, she shared how an IS sat through class while the faculty member made a discriminatory comment about "wiping out the whole Middle East." Overall, showing how ISs' national identity played a significant role in their experiences and well-being, on or off campus, in the U.S.

Job Search Difficulties and Inequities in the U.S. Workforce. As ISs enter the job market, they experience multiple challenges— issues with language proficiency, lack of skill network and ability to build professional connections, family pressure, low confidence for job interviews and low self-esteem about one's own skillset and lack of guidance, and support from their programs (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011; Dahling et al., 2013; Pitre, 2017). ISs also end up spending a long duration of time familiarizing themselves with Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) rules which regulate international student employment (Pitre, 2017).

ISs continue to grow in number but H-1B work visas continue to remain capped (Bound et al, 2021). This forces many ISs, many of whom are non-STEM majors, and not considered highly skilled by the USCIS, to return to their home country upon completion of their academic degrees. This accentuates the systemic inequity present in the U.S. labor market because of federal policies. ISs are used for their financial and intellectual assets to progress the U.S. economy but are not appropriately catered to considering the broader impacts of this capped visa (Shih, 2016). To add to this, employers and organizations discriminate based on nationality and deny jobs to ISs based on sponsorship needs (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Newell & Sethi, 2023; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Often, when not finding jobs, ISs change majors and/or pursue another academic degree, often graduate degrees, for a chance to navigate the U.S. job market one more time (Pitre, 2017). This often leads these individuals to return home (Cantwell, 2019; Lee, 2007, 2010). However, it is important to acknowledge that not all experience the same job search challenges, as nationality and choice of occupation, mostly based on STEM versus non-STEM degrees, impact these experiences (Nunes & Arthur, 2013).

To do justice to the entirety of the ICA experience, only addressing the literature about ISs is not sufficient. An important part of their identity is being an athlete. I will now discuss CA literature that is relevant to my study before finally, addressing the limited ICA literature. I will focus on CAs in DI HEIs due to my topic's situatedness within DI HEIs.

College Athletes in U.S. Higher Education Institutions

CAs are a diverse and talented set of college students at U.S. HEIs. They choose to earn a college degree and compete on varsity athletic teams while bound by the NCAA's amateurism rules. Specifically, in DI, these athletes experience high-pressure athletic environments and compete at the highest levels in their sports (Meyer, 2017). Currently, a total of 522,165 CAs compete across all NCAA divisions of which 188,682 are enrolled in DI HEIs (NCAA, 2022). According to the NCAA Demographics database, 62% of all CAs identify as white, 16% as Black, 7% as Hispanic/Latino, 5% with two or more races, 5% identify as international (also termed "alien" until December 2022), 3% as unknown and 2% as Asian (NCAA, 2022). It is also important to acknowledge that current literature often addresses DCA experiences when engaging in college sports and athlete research. Thus, throughout this section, the experiences of CAs and DCAs might be discussed interchangeably.

Amateurism: College Athlete Labor and Exploitation

Amateurism is the founding principle of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S. (Lemons, 2017). This model originated from the "British aristocratic belief" (p.8) that elites, those who played sports for leisure, should not be competing against the working class—those who get paid to play (Comeaux, 2019). Thus, following this principle, the NCAA believes CAs "should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental, and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is a vocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises" (NCAA, 2012–2013, p.

4). However, since then, the NCAA has transformed into a multi-billion-dollar business. It is selfishly dedicated to monetary gains by controlling and exploiting the rights of CAs across gender and race, especially Black men in revenue sports. It dehumanizes and commodifies their bodies by viewing them as sources of athletic labor and often disposes at one's own will (Commeaux & Grummert, 2020; Gayles et al., 2022; Hawkins, 2010; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013). Thus, leaving them unprepared for life after sport (Haslerig, 2017; Halslerig & Navarro, 2016).

From 1906 till July 2021, the NCAA continued to rely on amateurism as its foundation to avoid compensating athletes outside of their athletic scholarship. Today, most CAs can engage in monetizing their NIL. Still, inequities exist—compliance officers and NIL-specific staff members continue to be subjective in their vetting process (Sethi et al., 2022). They decide if an athlete is being paid market value, based on the CA's profile status in society. (Sethi et al., 2022)—one example of how the NCAA and its member institutions continue to find ways to control and monitor the lives of CAs (Hawkins et al., 2015; Huma & Staurowsky, 2012; Pierce et al. 2010).

The NCAA's stated purpose is "to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body and, by so doing, retain a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports" (NCAA, 2012–2013, p. 1). While the NCAA states the importance of being a student first, it is long known that, especially at DI schools, this is not the case (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Gayles et al., 2022). CAs at the DI level train and compete for 40-43.3 hours, like full-time employers, instead of 20 hours per week and miss classes 2-3 times, especially in revenue sports (Comeaux, 2019; Wolverton, 2008). Thus, are left with little time to

pursue academics and career preparation since their athletic prowess is seen as extremely lucrative (Adler & Adler, 1987; Beamon & Bell, 2006; Comeaux, 2019; McCormick & McCormick, 2012). Instead, they continued to pose additional amateurism rules, for decades, to further control and restrict CAs— enrollment timeline upon graduation, practice, competition, tryouts, and contracts with professional teams, receiving payment or preferential treatment based on performance (pay for play), receiving prize money, and receiving benefits from agents (Comeaux, 2019).

The consequences of amateurism are plenty but the exploitation of all CAs, some more than others, has raised concern since decades. However, even today CAs continue to be exploited in ways more than one (Beamon, 2008; Donnor, 2005; Gayles et al., 2022; Haslerig, 2017). The NCAA continues to own control over their 'rights to publicity' (Afshar, 2015; Gerrie, 2016) and fails to compensate athletes for their labor. It is well known that if DCAs in DI Power 5 football and basketball programs were compensated between 2005-2019, they would make $1.2-1.4 billion annually (Tato & Singer, 2021). This shows the amount of revenue these athletes generate for HEIs without personal financial benefits. Instead, often to maintain the image of this multi-billion-dollar commercial enterprise (Comeaux, 2019; Gayles et al., 2022), even the control over one's academic degree is taken away (Beamon, 2008; Navarro, 2015). Sack and Staurowsky (1998) discussed how HEIs are "far more concerned with exploiting the athletic talent [of student athletes] than with nurturing academic potential" (p.104) for upward mobility in society (Beamon, 2008)—the goal for many, especially Black CAs in DI HEIs (Bista & Gaulee, 2017).

Challenges Faced by College Athletes

In addition to the experiences and challenges of CAs discussed above, here are additional ones unique to those in DI HEI as related to my study.

Educational Challenges. As intercollegiate athletics continue to get highly commercialized, time and space given to the importance of academics get even less at the DI level (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Comeaux, 2019; Navarro, 2015)—the promise of a world-class education remains a fallacy (Simiyu, 2012). CAs cannot choose any major they desire due to conflicts with practice schedules. To remain eligible and are clustered into 'easier' classes and majors held in low regard to ensure eligibility (Brown, 2011; Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016; Fountain & Finley 2009; Gurney & Southall, 2013). Paskus (2006), in a study of more than 20,000 CAs, revealed that one in five athletes across all NCAA divisions were allowed to choose a major of their choice. This is concerning and raises a scare for the lack of a successful future of CAs since majors forced upon them might not be in alignment with their career aspirations (Gurney & Southall, 2013). Additionally, racial biases impact academic advisors advising styles—how they enroll and if they engage in clustering of certain CAs—many see white athletes as intellectually superior to those of color, especially Black athletes (Donnor, 2005; Hawkins, 2010; McCormick & McCormick, 2012). Fountain and Finley (2009) found that white athletes were highly clustered in business programs as compared to non-white in general studies and behavioral sciences. In the eye of many faculty members, CAs, especially Black CAs are seen as inferior, "dumb jocks" and likely to cheat. In addition to high athletic pressure and lack of time to focus on academics, they continue to be treated unfairly—provided no guidance to improve classroom performance but instead are consistently coached for athletic performance (Donnor, 2012; Hawkins, 2010; Navarro, 2015). DI athletic departments provide basic academic resources like subject-specific tutors and writing center support. However, support services staff in academics and CA development are unable to provide specialized support (Comeaux, 2015).

Isolation, Identity and Racism. Athletic demands, strict routines, structured environments, and regular monitoring force CAs to remain within the athletic bubble, hurting their ability to engage with campus resources and events—thus, leading to isolation, which further impacts their overall growth and well-being (Finnell, 2022; Fuller, 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2018). Structured environments enforced by DI athletic departments discourage exploratory behaviors and encourage dependence, assimilation, and conformity (Martens & Lee, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2005). Additionally, it leads to a heightened sense of athletic identity which significantly impacts their ability to see themselves as anything but an athlete—negatively impacts their ability to make new friends, engage with faculty, and seek guidance, and low levels of self-esteem when not performing athletically, inability to think long term and engage in career readiness work, (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Lavallee, 2005; Smith & Hardin, 2018; Wippert & Wippert, 2008).

Athletes of color experience additional challenges that continue to negatively impact their experience. For example, Black CAs experience consistent use of microaggressions, racially discriminating remarks, and questioning of academic ability due to their highly skilled athletic abilities (Beamon, 2014; Carter-Francique et al., 2011; Singer, 2005, 2016). Latinx DCAs also experience racially discriminating remarks and jokes, lack of belonging, and distance from families which further adds psychological burdens about not being able to care for elders, and negative interactions with peers due to their racial identity **(**Manwell et al., 2021; Ortega, 2020; Ortega, 2021; Sato et al., 2018**)**—most not experienced by white peers. Athletes of color, especially Black athletes, view campus climate as hostile and are less likely to feel a sense of belongingness and connectedness to their campus community as compared to their white peers (Comeaux, 2012; Foster, 2005). Again, such instances of discrimination and stereotyping show

how just within the DCAs, especially athletes of color, experiences are so diverse solely based on racial identity. Overall, not even all DCAs have similar experiences within U.S. HEIs (Hextrum & Sethi, 2022). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that connections can be made between them and the ICAs due to the potential of similar racial and marginalized identities in DI HEIs.

Psychological, Physiological, and Emotional Wellbeing. Several factors can be exceptionally stress-provoking for CAs—lack of personal time, injuries, possibility of red shirt, not playing in the lineup, navigating conflict with coaches and teammates, pressure to win, excessive anxiety to perform academically and athletically, fear of failure, burnout, time management difficulties, poor relationships with professors, pressure to provide for a family, career preparation, and looking for jobs (Martens & Lee, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2005). All these mental health stressors often lead to physiological problems like lack of sleep, fatigue, headaches, tension, and digestive issues (Pritchard & Wilson, 2005). Black athletes, like other marginalized groups on college campuses, experience heightened levels of these stressors, loneliness, and isolation after instances of racism and discrimination (Coakley & Pike, 2009; Harrison, 2002; Hillman, 1995; Kihl et al., 2008; Simiyu, 2012). This hurts their athletic and academic performance and takes away from the promise of a holistic collegiate experience.

Lastly, once CAs graduate, they can experience body image and weight issues (Kerr et al., 2014). The highly structured environment CAs are enclosed in leads to having no knowledge about food literacy, workout, and nutrition upon graduation (Stokowski, 2021), causing stress, anxiety, depression, and body image issues (Kerr et al., 2014; Papathomas et al., 2018; Shifflett et al., 2002; Smith & Hardin, 2018). This can be a psychologically and physically disturbing experience for many and hurt their well-being. Moving forward post-completion of one's

intercollegiate athletics career, when looking for jobs, these psychological, physiological, and emotional factors can continue to have an impact on all CAs and negatively impact their career readiness and job search journey.

Navigating What's Next: Career Readiness and Transition to Life After Sport

Termination of one's athletic career is challenging (Parhan, 1993). CAs getting close to graduation (termination) and preparing for the workforce have a defined number of years before retirement. Thus, their collegiate career is critical to engage in career readiness and preparation for success in the workforce. Athletic departments and HEIs have an ethical obligation to help CAs prepare for success in non-athletic-related careers (Beamon, 2008). However, research shows that DI HEIs place extremely high emphasis on athletics but not on career preparation even though it is well known that 98% or more CAs do not play professional sports and/or enter the workforce after graduation (Kidwell, 2005; Reason et al., 2006). More so, coaches and administrators view this element as detrimental to athletic performance (Meyer, 2017). Excessive athletic demands on this population hurt their ability to engage in campus events and professional development engagements like workshops and internships (Fountain & Finley, 2011; Kirby, 2013; Meyer; 2017; Navarro, 2015). This leads to identity foreclosure, which makes athletes unable to balance athletic and academic roles and lose sight of the future, and fail to choose a major in alignment with career aspirations, engage in career exploration, planning, and preparation (Adler, 1987; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Smith & Hardin, 2018).

Manning et al. (2022) conducted a study with DI soccer women CAs to assess their adaptation to the transition while planning to graduate from DI schools. They shared how the environment was highly competitive and often not oriented towards post-athletic career transitions. They believed that getting the time off to engage in internship opportunities would be

beneficial to their future careers but due to lack of time and busy practice, competition, and class schedules, they were unable to focus on such opportunities. Additionally, coaches and academic advisors often discouraged CAs from engaging in internships to maintain eligibility status. Beamon (2008) chose to focus on the racial aspect of CAs during their career transition. He found that African American CAs viewed education from two lenses: (1) athletic opportunities may provide a chance to gain an education and build a career, which otherwise might not be possible for many who are underprivileged, and (2) this athletic opportunity would lead to exploitation and hinder the chances of pursuing professional careers upon graduation. Furthermore, while it was noted that gaining an athletic scholarship is a golden opportunity in the African American community, it isn't always the case (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Edwards, 1983, 1988). This shows how the same opportunity can differently impact people depending upon their identities and position in society; in this case, a college degree hindered rather than supported their occupational achievement (Lomax, 2000).

Lastly, Meyer (2017) stated social, economic, and cultural capital plays a role in one's ability to prepare and enter the workforce. While the current lack of resources provided by the athletic departments might be insufficient for some, CAs whose parents are educated and established in the workforce are in a better position to succeed after graduation (Hextrum, 2018).

Understudied Former College Athlete Experiences and Outcomes

While there is limited research available on CA readiness, there is even less research about CA outcomes upon entering the workforce (NCAA, 2020). Occasionally, the NCAA does work towards learning about CA experiences and how they flourish after intercollegiate athletic careers. The NCAA's (2020) "Undergraduate Experiences and Post-College Outcomes for Division I Student-Athletes" consisted of a sample of 4889 former CAs from all NCAA divisions

and was administered through web-based surveys to investigate post-college outcomes of former CAs in comparison to non-athletes. The NCAA found that DI former CAs earned a greater number of graduate degrees upon graduation as compared to non-athletes. 79% of the former athletes were likely to find a job within six months or less after graduation and 91% of former athletes who graduated after 1991 were employed full-time or were satisfied with their desired level of employment. Former athletes, as compared to non-athletes, were also more likely to hold managerial positions and 62% of them were likely to graduate college with $0 in debt as compared to the 52% likelihood of non-athletes. While former athletes did share positive responses about their experiences with faculty, less than half of them in the study had mentors who guided them to pursue their goals instead of programs and structures set in place for their professional growth. Differences in well-being and overall experience based on racial identity, while only discussing folks who identified as Black or white, showed that Black athletes as compared to their white counterparts had fewer encounters with faculty who made their learning experience enjoyable. Again, pointing to the reality of diversity in experiences based on one's racial identity.

This work with former CAs is rarely done in the academy but is critical. Former CAs can provide meaningful advice to make the lives of athletes who are currently enrolled in HEIs inclusive and holistic. It is also important to check in with these folks after graduation so HEIs can evaluate their programs and departments—it can help support staff, coaches, and administrators to truly assess their forms of support and guidance standards. Thus, I decided to engage with former DI ICAs in this study to explore their experiences—the potential to enhance the current ICA experience while also adding to the scarce literature available about ICA career readiness and life after sport experiences.

In the entirety of the CA literature, often, scholars continue to address the CA population as a homogenous group. Some distinctions are made on race, but not on cultural and national identity. Thus, does a disservice to ICAs and their lives in the U.S. which further misguides administrators, coaches, and HEI staff to engage in a "one size fits all" approach with the entire CA population. Now, I will engage with the ICA literature and tie it back to the already existing literature on CAs and ISs. I will identify gaps in the ICA literature that need to be addressed to serve ICAs to have a holistic collegiate experience and be prepared for life after sport.

International College Athletes in U.S. Higher Education Institutions

ICAs are a unique student population with intersectional identities. Along with attending school full-time, ICAs compete for varsity athletics programs (Hong, 2018). Often, ICAs cannot do both—play elite-level sports and attend colleges in their home countries (Bale, 1991; Manwell et al., 2021; Popp et al., 2009). Thus, the U.S. intercollegiate athletics model where academics and athletics can be pursued simultaneously at an elite level attracts large numbers of ICAs to DI HEIs (Bale, 1991). ICAs pursue intercollegiate athletics due to the opportunity to get an athletic scholarship, add a sense of adventure to their lives, grow professionally, and gain a world-class education—often a false promise made by coaches (Popp et al., 2010). Additionally, many ICAs see this model as a steppingstone to prepare for the next phase of life in pursuing professional sports careers or pursuing careers in the workforce (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2011).

Today, over 25,000 ICAs are enrolled across NCAA member institutions, of which 15,484 are enrolled at DI HEIs (NCAA, 2023). In totality, ICAs make up almost 13% of the entire CA population in U.S. HEIs. In 1999, only 3,515 ICAs enrolled in NCAA DI institutions, and by 2016, the amount grew to 19,500 (NCAA, 2017; NCAA, 2023) and continued to grow. For the 2021-2022 academic year, despite concerns related to COVID-19, ICA numbers in DI increased by four percent from the 2020-2021 academic year (NCAA, 2023).

A Unique Minority Population

By virtue of their population size and international status, ICAs are minorities in U.S. HEIs (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). The lack of publicly available data obscures the diversity within this population. Additionally, the NCAA does not collect racial identity demographics of ICAs. Instead, it labeled them as "aliens" in their demographics and databases until December 2022. Their data collection strategy telegraphs the message that ICAs' distinct identities are irrelevant (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). This views them as a monolith and further perpetuates the harm of portraying ICAs as invisible regardless of their distinct identities and innumerable contributions. Currently, ICAs in HEIs represent 207 countries and six different continents (NCAA, 2023). The top 10 most well-represented countries include: Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Australia, Sweden, France, Brazil, Italy, and the Netherlands, making up 66% of the total ICA population. The other 44% represents 198 different countries. As for continent representation in DI: 47% belong to the continent of Africa, 26% come from North America, 7% represent Asia, Oceania, and South America and 6% represent Africa (NCAA, 2023). Therefore, even though ICAs are minorities, they represent the greatest diversity (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). However, it is also important to note that they are not often minorities in all spaces. For example, in DI tennis, ICAs represent over 60% of the total tennis players across NCAA member institutions.

While they are present in large numbers in non-revenue sports, ICAs' numbers in revenue sports continue to increase significantly as well. For example, in 2016, 208 football ICAs were present at DI institutions and today, almost double, 408 ICAs compete in DI football (NCAA, 2023). Still, researchers and practitioners often present ICAs as a homogenous group, assuming all ICAs experience the same difficulties within U.S. HEIs. As a result, studies rarely examine the diversity and its implications within ICAs and practitioners continue to underserve this

population (Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Foo et al., 2022; Frawley, 2015; Popp et al., 2010; Streno et al., 2020; Trendafilova et al., 2010). By erasing in-group differences, researchers and practitioners miss the range of identities, cultures, and nationalities within ICAs. A notable exception, Lee and Opio (2011) examined differences in ICA experience based on their country and continent of origin. They identified how ICAs from different countries in Africa experienced discrimination based on their national identity like verbal insults, cultural intolerance, and name-calling on college campuses and within team settings whereas white-European ICAs endured no such harm.

International College Athletes as Sport Labor Migrants

The role of professional international athletes in the U.S. is often associated with sport labor migration (Bale, 1991). However, the most dominant form of sport migration within the last decade involves the recruitment of ICAs (Bartolacci, 2010). Still, they are rarely viewed as sport labor migrants in the literature or within HEIs due to the NCAA's foundational value of viewing CAs as students, not employees. Throughout this section, I argue that regardless of their status as students in U.S. HEIs, they are sport labor migrants viewed as sources of revenue generation, athletic capital, to enhance institutional reputation, and global publicity and marketing (Bale, 1991; Frawley, 2015; Holman, 2007; Maguire, 1996, 2004; Pierce et al., 2011; Weston, 2006). ICAs are a means to job security for DI coaches and often an 'instant help' to athletically poor and low-confidence teams (Bale, 1991). Hence, coaches travel the globe and recruit ICAs to reduce pressure on themselves, win championships, and enhance the program's athletic reputation across all DI institutions (Bale, 1991). They even engage in recruitment based on the athletic talent and skill owned by ICAs in certain countries and due to their previous connections with former ICAs from those countries (Bale, 1991; Pierce et al, 2011). This creates

recruiting pipelines that perpetuate the brawn drain (Bale, 1991). For example, a talent pipeline of elite track and field stars from Kenya was found at schools like the University of Texas El Paso and Washington State University, and a pipeline of track talent from Nigeria was identified at the University of Missouri and Mississippi State University (Bale, 1991). Bale (1991) deemed this phenomenon as brawn drain in which developed nations (like the U.S.) steal talented individuals from lesser-developed nations (Kontaxakis, 2011), exacerbating global inequalities—in IS literature it is known as a brain drain due to the presence of intellectual capital. ICA recruitment continues to increase as DI HEIs continue to become an even bigger commercial enterprise. In addition, in reviewing existing literature, I found how the NCAA, HEIs, and other athletic-specific organizations perpetuate the brawn drain and favor those countries and people with immense economic and social capital for recruitment purposes. NACADA, a national association of college academic advisors, administrations, counselors, faculty, and students published recommendations for avoiding amateur violations when recruiting ICAs. Sethi et al. (2022) examined NACADA's guidebook and found the organization encouraged U.S. coaches to recruit from international schools with U.S. curricula and English instruction, arguing that such ICAs would be a better fit for their teams. This shows how the NCAA and other college sports organizations are discriminatory even based on ICAs' possession of economic and social capital for their selfish means—ICA assimilation into sports teams and campus environment (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024).

While they only represent 13% of the entire CA population, their impact and contributions are multifold (Bale, 1991; Foo et al., 2022; Lee & Opio, 2011). In addition to athletic contributions and those already mentioned above in the CA and IS section, they also add a great amount of diversity and cultural richness within all spaces of college campuses,

especially athletic departments, and sports teams (Sato et al., 2018). They financially contribute to the U.S. economy as not all ICAs come to the U.S. on athletic scholarships at the DI level even though current research might not portray it this way. Additionally, they are often more academically prepared than DCAs due to superior high school education in other countries around the world (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b). They impact not only the athletic reputation but also the academic reputation and overall GPA of athletic programs (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b). Most importantly, like DCAs, especially those of color, ICAs are great sources of entertainment to U.S. HEIs, and surrounding communities and their performance can raise millions in revenue from TV contracts for these institutions (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997). Therefore, it is critical to move beyond the notion of viewing this population as a minority only recruited for athletic gain and reputation. In fact, they make several contributions within and outside of athletic programs that go unnoticed.

Experiences and Challenges: Recruitment and On Campus

Throughout the rest of this section, it is important to note that all the experiences and challenges shared above in the CA and IS section apply to ICAs due to their intersectional identity. Now, I will briefly address some challenges that are the same as those shared above and then discuss literature that is unique to ICAs. It is critical to understand that ICAs, based on their individual identity, have a lot to navigate in a new country in pursuit of a better life (Foo et al., 2022).

Prior to Entering the U.S.: Recruitment, College Selection, and Admissions. Many ICAs do not have the luxury of growing up with the cultural backdrop of the intercollegiate athletic model (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). They are unaware of the education and athletic system, geographic location, and racial climate of U.S. HEIs (Abbey-Pinegar, 2010; Hextrum, 2018;

Popp et al., 2010). Those who are aware or learn about this opportunity, know so from friends, personal connections, contact with coaches, and exposure to international competition (Manwell et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2011). Thus, again, showing the benefits of possessing economic and social capital. Applying for a visa, registering with the NCAA eligibility center, submitting college applications, taking the TOEFL and SAT, making long-distance calls for recruitment purposes, creating recruiting videos and working with recruiting agencies, and buying flight tickets adds financial burdens on ICAs before setting foot on campus (Foo et al., 2021). Thus, making it harder for those who do not have such resources to gain access to this opportunity. Additionally, athletic departments and the NCAA require ICAs to assimilate and follow American standards through admission and beyond (Sethi et al, 2022; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). For example, to submit the NCAA eligibility center application, all ICAs from non-English speaking countries—60% of the total ICA population—are required to convert all paperwork in native languages to English prior to submitting. No language translation support is available as an integrative measure to support ICA transition to college.

Once ICAs pursue U.S. athletic recruitment, they encounter the NCAA eligibility center rules for the first time and may unwittingly be ineligible to compete as their home countries have different athletic and academic standards (Kaburakis, 2007). Kaburakis and Solomon (2005) found that NCAA amateur regulations conflict with international pipelines of youth sport access where it is common for youth athletes to receive subsidies and prize money when competing. These conflicting standards can exclude most ICAs from being recruited (Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005). Unlike CAs who often have support from experienced peers, recruiting agencies, high school coaches, and families with economic and social capital (Kaburakis, 2007), prospective ICAs are largely left unprepared to navigate the differing and conflicting eligibility standards

with little help or support from the NCAA (Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005). Such uncertainty ignites vulnerability for ICAs even before they turn in their application. Furthermore, since all NCAA eligibility center and DI specific compliance paperwork is only available in English, ICAs from many countries are forced to sign away the next four to six years of their lives without knowing any of the details provided to them and asked from them.

If prospective ICAs are fortunate enough to overcome the myriad barriers listed above and begin recruitment, their process unfolds differently than DCAs. Hextrum (2017) found that ICAs rarely visited HEIs, attended camps, and met coaches in person prior to signing national letters of intent, accepting scholarships, or enrolling. ICAs chose HEIs based on the number of athletic scholarships available, their perception of the head coach, chances of getting a good job, level of competition at the HEI, and the academic reputation of the school as opposed to DCAs and ISs whose primary factor of importance was the academic reputation of institutions prior to selection (Popp et al., 2011). Additionally, many ICAs from non-native English-speaking countries are unprepared for HEIs in the U.S.—inability to speak, read and/or write exclusively in English (Baghurst et al., 2018; Frawley, 2015; Manwell et al., 2022). However, colleges still recruit these athletes by signing special admission waivers, approved by the NCAA, to admit ICAs for selfish athletic gains. Thus, forcing ICAs to suddenly assimilate into the campus and athletic culture at DI HEIs (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024).

Additionally, ICAs must go through the exact same visa process as ISs, which adds another financial burden and exposes them to instances of neo-racism, discrimination, and uncertainty based on their religious, racial, and national identity (Lee & Opio, 2011). Such experiences, collectively, can negatively impact ICA well-being— recruitment and admissions exacerbate the transitional challenges for ICAs as compared to ISs and DCAs from the start of

their collegiate careers (Hextrum, 2018; Lee & Opio, 2011). In addition to these unique challenges faced by ICAs, the recruitment process for all CAs, including DCAs, begins the negative socialization processes (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Hawkins, 1999; Hextrum, 2018; Navarro, 2015; Simiyu, 2012).

On U.S. College Campuses. ICAs experience cultural, financial, social, athletic, academic, personal, and institutional challenges at U.S. HEIs (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). To adapt and adjust to the new environment, they state that the following factors play a huge role in ICA adjustment and adaption, (a) personal: confidence in one's ability and competency in English, (b) interpersonal: relationship and engagement with fellow peers, coaches and administrators, (c) perceptual: one's expectation from the program and the resources and support services provided to ICAs and (d) cultural distance: geographical and cultural gap between one's home country and host nation. While this might be the case, ICAs' experiences are all those lived by ISs—culture shock, homesickness, language barriers, neo-racism, discrimination, isolation, psychological and emotional issues, stereotyped as being handworkers, visa and immigration issues, inability to fit into academic environments, missing home/cultural food and so much more; and by CAs— athletic time demands, lack of focus on academics, no career readiness guidance and support, heightened athletic identity, issues with eligibility and amateurism, racism and discrimination (Abbey-Pinegar, 2010; Baghurst et al., 2018; Carodine et al., 2001; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Frawley, 2015; Kaburakis, 2007; Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005; Lee & Opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Newell, 2015; Pericak et al., 2023; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a, 2000b; Rodriguez, 2014; Sato et al., 2018; Streno et al., 2020; Watson, 2005).

However, it is important to note that not all ICAs experience all the challenges mentioned above. Depending on one's country of origin, first language, cultural and social ties, division of competition, etc., they may have diverse experiences (Lee & Opio, 2011; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). However, only a handful of scholars address this concept of ICAs wrongfully being treated as a monolith (Lee & Opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2010; Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). The rest address all ICAs as a homogenous group with similar experiences and needs while suggesting a 'one size fits all' approach to cater to this population (Trendafilova et al., 2010). They do not take into consideration the unique differences present amongst this population and how such kinds of research and practitioner recommendations can hurt rather than better ICA experiences in HEIs. Therefore, while I use the term ICAs throughout this document, in my study, I aim to identify this issue of specificity within the ICA population and weave in nationality and culture while discussing ICA experiences.

ICAs also face several challenges unique to their own population. First and foremost, the combination of language barriers and athletic time demands (Bale, 1991; Lee & Opio, 2011; Newell, 2015). Both these combined reduce their self-esteem and hurt their athletic and academic performance. In addition, it takes away from preparing for life after sport, which is one of the main reasons ICAs choose to come to the U.S. (Popp et al., 2010). Their bodies are used for athletic labor to win championships while leaving them unprepared for what's next (Bale, 1991). Academically, ICAs are not catered to appropriately by academic advisors in athletic departments even though they are very influential in the lives of ICAs and can make a significant impact on their overall growth (Carodine et al., 2001; Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011). They are unable to cater to the unique academic needs of this population based on their transition from

different education systems and countries around the world (Lee et al., 1981; Newell, 2015). ICAs' academic experience suffers due to a lack of awareness and education about this population and their needs.

Financially, ICAs face unique challenges as not all come on athletic scholarships and for those who do, they often face the uncertainty of getting their scholarship taken away/reduced, in certain gendered sports more than others. Based on their country of origin and its economic state, ICAs often face uncertainty regarding the value of money back home (Baghurst et al., 2018). For example, with the decline of the Mexican peso in 2015, Baghurst et al. (2018) discussed how this can negatively impact ICAs who rely on financial support from home.

Socially, while some ICAs adjusted better to college campuses due to consistent engagement with teammates, others experienced higher levels of homesickness and continued to stay in touch with their family and coaches from their home country (Baghurst et al., 2018; Streno et al., 2020). According to Shannon (2014), upon entering team settings, ICAs faced discrimination depending on their religious identity if they were dark-skinned and/or did not speak English fluently. They face additional discrimination and neo-racism by various stakeholders of U.S. HEIs, especially because they believe that ICAs take away scholarship opportunities from their DCAs, gain athletic experience, and go back to their home countries to benefit those nations in the Olympics (Hoffer, 1994). Even though several of these stakeholders are the reason behind ICA recruitment for athletic gain to institutions, they continue to engage in such xenophobic conversations about ICAs. Meanwhile, ICAs pour their time, effort, and talent into American athletic programs, which in return pours into U.S. nationalism through the platform of U.S. college sports (Bale, 1987; Bale, 1991; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). There are counterarguments to this notion like ICAs often use abundant resources and sometimes, quit after

a semester or two leaving athletic departments at a loss of their investment (Hoffer, 1994). In such instances, it's important to consider how frequently this occurs and whether ICAs' departure is linked to their recruitment based on athletic skills, despite their potential underpreparedness for U.S. education systems. Lastly, in social settings, ICAs experienced new challenges—nutrition, health, and body image concerns, navigating religious practices when traveling, how to tip in restaurants, eating dorm meals, and dining etiquette to fit in—again, showing how ICAs subconsciously get assimilated (Frawley, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024; Streno et al., 2020).

Athletic bubbles, isolated athletic spaces, are commonly experienced by all CAs. However, they have additional negative impacts on ICAs. It leaves them further isolated from campus without any engagement with campus resources, community/student groups, and cultural events (Manwell et al., 2021). This also leads to homesickness and loneliness, which can further negatively impact performance. While coaches and athletic department staff expect ICAs to quickly assimilate into U.S. culture and campus environment, such levels of isolation, which restrict ICAs' interactions, contradicts their already problematic expectation of assimilation (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). Additionally, ICAs must be cognizant of the geo-political environment that impacts their peace when present at U.S. HEIs, especially with sports teams and teammates (Manwell et al., 2021).

Athletically, ICAs have trouble when transitioning from their home countries to the U.S. as they are not used to simultaneously doing academics and athletics at a high level (Bale, 1991; Hong, 2018). Increased athletic expectations due to high pressure by coaches hurt ICA well-being, which in turn hurts their overall performance (Hurley & Cunningham, 1984). While high levels of athletic demands can lead to heightened anxiety, frustration, conflict, and depression for

all athletes, it is present in elevated levels for ICAs (Frawley, 2015). Additionally, ICAs face stressors of navigating relationships with coaches as communication and dynamics with coaches can be different from one's home country (Salinger Cenzual et al. 2021; Parham, 1993; Rodriguez, 2014). They must navigate going from individual sports to team environments in sports like tennis, golf, swimming, etc., and navigate conflicts and team dynamics with and between teammates and coaches. Thus, adding to the complexities of their overall experiences (Rodriguez, 2014).

Lastly, since ICAs are also ISs, they go through the same process to obtain an F-1 visa and gain work authorizations. However, ever since the passing of the NIL law for most college athletes, the inequities of this law and the lack of support towards ICAs by the NCAA and its member institutions have been further exposed. While all DCAs can engage in this opportunity to monetize their NIL and build a brand, ICAs on U.S. land are completely excluded, with a few exceptions: ICAs who went off U.S. land, signed deals and contracts with countries outside the U.S., pursued the NIL deal on U.S. land but gave their money away to fellow walk-ons/teammates, and changed their visa status due to professional level athletic abilities, to become a resident of the U.S. (Dosh, 2022; Wittry, 2022). Since July 1st, 2021, once the law was passed, neither the NCAA nor any of the DI HEIs have advocated for this student population. Instead, they continue to state how 'all' CAs can benefit from this new policy (NCAA, 2021). Additionally, federal agencies like USCIS, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and SEVP have ignored the basic rights and economic well-being of ICAs—other than one email notifying:

> SEVP continues to coordinate with its government partners, including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, to assess the number of impacted students

> and whether regulatory guidance is required to address this and related issues. SEVP will continue to monitor current and pending state and federal legislation on this issue and will provide additional updates through Broadcast Messages, Study in the States, social media and SEVP field representatives. (SEVIS SysAdmin, personal communication, July 19, 2021)

There has been no further correspondence from their end leaving ICAs uncertain in this evolving highly political intercollegiate athletics landscape. Lastly, HEIs are also rarely supportive of ICAs and often refer them to external immigration attorneys for legal assistance requiring ICAs to bear this cost themselves which is exclusionary, financially burdensome, and further privileges affluent students (Sethi & Hextrum, 2024).

Career Readiness and Transition to Life After Sport

As ICAs continue to be sources of athletic gain for DI HEIs, little attention is paid to their career readiness and life after sport experiences, especially in the workforce. Only a couple of pieces of literature touch upon the importance of ICAs' career readiness and transition to life after sport as an important yet missing piece within intercollegiate athletics departments and current research (Foster & Lally, 2021; Newell, 2015, 2016; Popp et al., 2009). A major point of discussion regarding the career readiness and transition out of sport phase of ICAs lives remains a conversation around their academic counseling and academic advising. Newell (2015) states that most of the advising and counseling within college athletics remains structured and catered around the DCA population. A limited amount of scholarship is dedicated to understanding the unique background of ICAs and how they should be assisted in choosing appropriate majors in alignment with their career goals (Newell, 2015). Popp et al. (2009) further identify that even

though ICAs might pay more attention to their academic careers as compared to athletic competitions when compared to their domestic counterparts, little scholarship or data is available to demonstrate their academic and professional trajectories. While the NCAA occasionally collects data regarding former CA outcomes, their satisfaction levels regarding the collegiate experience, and its impact on their lives after sport, no such data is collected about former ICAs. Additionally, the NCAA does not even collect data about ICAs' graduation rates, graduate school trajectories and where they go next, be it to their home country, another country, or stay in the U.S. and join the workforce. However, this information, if collected, would be highly beneficial to enhance the holistic ICA experience in DI HEIs. Several scholars address the need for academic advisors, career development, and life skills professionals to cater to this population's unique needs, not only to culturally adjust to the new environment but also to prepare ICAs for non-sport-related opportunities upon graduation (Carodine et al., 2001; Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Popp et al., 2011; Watson, 2005).

Like my study's participants, Foster and Lally (2021) also engaged with former ICAs who were at least five years out to understand the long-term impacts of the intercollegiate athletics experience. They found that the college athlete experience had a relatively positive impact on them as individuals but not entirely true when discussing their post athletics professional career-related transition. ICAs expressed they gained a better understanding of diverse cultures living on within the walls of U.S. HEIs and built social networks that proved to be helpful in their professional life as well. It is also important to acknowledge this study's sample population is a majority of ICAs from countries whose residents identify as predominantly white, which could be a reason why they experienced diversity for the first time

within U.S. college campuses. Additionally, the college athletics experience also helped ICAs in this study to develop resilience, learn time management skills, and understand the importance of a strong work ethic, which helped some during the transition into the workforce. However, I argue that resilience was a consequence of the circumstances and challenges ICAs have to experience in the U.S. and is not necessarily a positive outcome of the ICA experience. Some of the ICAs in the study also found their college athletics experience to be helpful as they chose to pursue and progress in the sports industry. Those already working within the department were able to guide and connect ICAs with their networks. However, all ICAs who did not choose to work in sports received no help or guidance in the career readiness and job search journey. Thus, leaving them stranded upon graduation.

Foster and Lally (2021) also address an issue that has not been empirically studied before within ICA literature—the chance of ICAs' degree transference to their home country. The results showed a majority of those who chose to go back home/were forced to leave due to visa restrictions did not have a positive experience with degree applicability. In some countries, ICAs were seen as overqualified for most jobs with a U.S. degree, and in others, the U.S. degree was not considered specialized. This portrayed how ICAs based on their country of origin had different experiences in the workforce. While found but not discussed in Foster and Lally's (2021) work, it is important to note how nations and their workforce norms can create significant disadvantages for some ICAs over others. Such findings require athletic departments and their stakeholders to understand these nuances, educate themselves, and then educate and serve ICAs accordingly.

Shortcomings in International College Athlete Literature

A thorough analysis of research on ISs, CAs, and ICAs reveals a critical gap. Many aspects beyond the athletic careers of ICAs on U.S. college campuses remain unexplored and under-discussed. These neglected topics include distinct identities and needs of ICAs, the importance of social, economic, and cultural capital in their to and through U.S. HEI experiences, career readiness support, and the transition out of sport from athletics to the workforce. Therefore, I argue that coaches and HEIs at the DI level heavily recruit ICAs for their own benefit, often neglecting their holistic development and ability to achieve their own goals and aspirations. Essentially, ICAs are treated like sport labor migrants, viewed primarily as sources of athletic capital, pressured to assimilate during their athletic careers, and left unprepared for the professional world. The NCAA, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, prioritizes its success over the future aspirations of these athletes.

While existing research recognizes all ISs as contributors of intellectual and economic capital (Bound et al., 2021), ICAs are often solely discussed in terms of their athletic contributions to U.S. HEIs. This perspective seems flawed when in reality ICAs invest significantly in the U.S. economy (most do not receive full scholarships) and contribute intellectual capital alongside their athletic prowess. This narrow framing in the literature is problematic and minimizes the true value of ICAs and the goals they set to accomplish when pursuing intercollegiate athletic careers in the U.S.

This dissertation speaks to these shortcomings shared above, especially as it pertains to former DI ICA through the theoretical lens of sport labor migration. It enhances the depth of ICA scholarship and emphasizes the need for integrative and individualized support services, career programming, and professional development provided to support ICAs within athletic

departments and DI HEIs. Further, investigates the roles various stakeholders within HEIs, the NCAA, and the federal government play in the lives of ICAs and how they can be inclusive, supportive, and fair towards this population.

Theoretical Framework

Global Sport Labor Migration

Sport labor migration studies began in the 1940s when athletes from around the world traveled to other countries to play professional and intercollegiate sports. However, very little attention is paid to this phenomenon and the transitional challenges and outcomes experienced by international athletes in host nations, especially ICAs (Maguire, 2004). Often, sport labor migration is studied in the context of professional sports like soccer (Lanfranchi, 1994; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Magee & Sugden, 2002; McGovern, 2000; 2002; Stead & Maguire, 2000a; 2000b), basketball (Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire, 1994; Maguire & Pearton, 2000a; 2000b; Maguire & Stead, 1998), cricket (Hill, 1994; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Stead & Maguire, 1998), baseball (Klein, 2006; Takahashi & Horne, 2006), rugby (Williams, 1994), ice hockey (Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Genest, 1994), and handball (Agergaard, 2008). More specific research has taken place regarding the migration of Kenyan athletes (Bale & Sang, 1996), the migration of athletes to Finland (Olin & Penttila, 1994), and migration in sports that originated in Latin America (Arbena, 1994). However, the migration of international athletes, especially ICAs, continues to not be acknowledged, overlooked, and remains understudied.

The globalization of sports impacts host nations and those from other nations who travel the globe to compete for professional teams and U.S. HEIs (Bale, 1991; Thibault, 2009). Over the years, the globalization of sports has been achieved at the expense of individuals, organizations, and countries with limited resources and on the backs of the poor (Foer, 2006; Sage, 2005; Wertheim, 2004). While international athletes from many countries migrate to more

powerful nations to gain access to resources like financial support, high-quality coaching, training, and infrastructure, they do a favor to host nations (Bale, 1991; Bale & Maguire, 1994; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Weston, 2006). Host nations, athletic teams, and organizations gain access to better talent and skilled professionals (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 200; Weston, 2006). They do so at lower prices due to the low talent acquisition cost they reap when recruiting players from developing countries to play for a developed nation (Bale, 1991; Bretón, 2000). For example, Bretón (2000) reported a statement made by the vice president of Colorado Rockies which said, 'instead of signing four [American] guys at $25,000 each, you sign 20 [Dominican] guys for $5,000' (p. 14). Additionally, the migration of these athletes still hurts their nations. With little to no resources to try to develop talent, they continue to lose their talented athletes and potential sources of high revenue generation to nations who already have power and financial means (Thibault, 2009). Powerful countries in Europe and the U.S. have been known to recruit athletes from all around the globe. For example, Foer (2004) shares Brazil is the largest producer of football talent with thousands of Brazilians who have contracts to play football in Europe. They are recruited since professional leagues like the Premier League pay millions of dollars in transfer fees to these athletes to compete for another country/league—leaving the league in Brazil with 'second-rate' rosters and poor fan engagement (Foer, 2004).

For decades, nations like the U.S. and Great Britain have been temporary homes for many ICAs and professionals respectively. However, regardless of the athletic talent and cultural diversity they bring to these powerful nations, individuals in host nations continue to view them as threats to their economy and local sporting environments (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007). Professional sports organizations and U.S. HEIs continue to walk the fine line between promoting the sport and all the financial gains it brings due to the presence of international

athletes while trying to protect spots in the lineup for domestic athletes who might not be as highly skilled and talented (Iredale, 2001). For example, from 1969-1973, the NCAA allowed only 10-14 ICAs to compete on each institutional team while the rest had to be Americans (Holman, 2007). This helped U.S. HEIs make their teams competitive and globally recognized while also not disappointing American, or domestic, athletes, parents of athletes, and fans because they believed their tax-paying dollars were benefiting others instead of their American kids (Holman, 2007; Weston, 2006).

Sport Labor Migration in the Intercollegiate Athletics Context

While current literature discusses sport migration in the professional sports world to some extent, very little is discussed regarding sport labor migration within intercollegiate athletics, especially as it pertains to addressing how ICAs are treated as sport labor migrants by the NCAA and U.S. HEIs (Bale, 1991; Garrett et al., 2020; Holman, 2007; Love & Kim, 2011; Weston, 2006; Zillmer, et al., 2015). In the U.S. context, the rise of sport labor migration began in the late 1940s with coaches recruiting Canadian hockey players in large numbers (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007). They were of great importance to HEIs as they brought increased media attention and helped HEIs win championships (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007). However, the Canadians were unhappy and saw the U.S. as a deterrent to the development of the domestic hockey player—brawn drain (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007). Still, recruitment continued with restrictions limiting the number of ICAs on teams in the early 1970s and increasing the strictness of the amateurism eligibility criteria (Holman, 2007). These efforts by NCAA committees took place due to the issues U.S. citizens were having with ICAs coming to the U.S. for a short time to use the infrastructure and facilities to get better and stronger before returning to their home countries for

the Olympics and/or also taking away scholarship spots from their domestic athletes (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007).

The number of ICAs has consistently grown over the last few decades as coaches and administrators see the benefit of recruiting this population—academic excellence, athletic talent, enhanced sense of diversity, and culture-enriching campus environment, figures for global recognition and global engagement which further enhances revenue generation for these institutions and their athletic programs (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007; Weston, 2006). Recruiting ICAs for short periods has become a business model for U.S. HEIs (Holman, 2007). A former Winthrop University NCAA DI tennis coach was quoted stating "if you don't recruit overseas, you're taking yourself out of a major market" (Weston, 2006, p. 836) since he believed that to stay competitive and retain his job, it was essential to recruit from this population.

Thus, I engage with the sport labor migration framework to explore how it applies to ICAs and how their career outcomes are impacted by exploitative labor relationships. I discuss how ICA bodies are exploited by intercollegiate athletic departments for athletic gain, reputation, and global recognition/engagement (Bale, 1991; Jara, 2015). While there is research about IS' exploitation as "cash cows" for U.S. HEIs (Cantwell, 2019; Choudaha, 2017), the exploitation of ICAs is different: majorly, their athletic labor and public image rather than only tuition dollars are how they benefit HEIs. In addition, unlike professional athletes, they do not even receive money for their athletic performance. This concept of sport labor migration makes visible the different ways ICAs are exploited and treated inequitably. Oftentimes, the "world-class" athletic and educational experience promised to ICAs is left unfulfilled (Bale, 1991; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). They are expected to assimilate into U.S. college culture, engage in rigorous practice and competition schedules, and perform both academically and athletically (Bale, 1991; Sethi &

Hextrum, 2024). ICAs invest in the U.S. economy and pour into U.S. nationalism through their athletic contributions yet continue to be seen as outsiders and treated inequitably. For instance, negative and exclusionary perceptions of coaches and staff towards ICAs rightfully not being allowed to engage in NIL (Newell & Sethi, 2023). They experience exclusionary and discriminatory immigration policies as well as ignorant and anti-immigrant HEIs, organizations, and employers making it extremely challenging for ICAs to flourish in the U.S. (Lee & Opio, 2011; Sethi et al., 2022). Many are not allowed to choose their major(s) and are rarely provided individualized or integrative career guidance that caters to their unique needs or experiences (Newell, 2015). They are provided little to no support from HEIs about professional development and workforce opportunities, leaving the majority uninformed about future career pathways. This leaves the onus on ICAs and their economic, social, and cultural capital to navigate these challenging environments, especially their career readiness, job search, and transition out of sport phase.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This study was conducted using a qualitative research methodology to explore and understand the career readiness and job search experiences of a minoritized student population, International College Athletes (ICAs), in great depth (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Using this methodology, I explored ICA transition out of sport experiences based on their unique identities, experiences, and challenges in U.S. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) when preparing to enter the workforce. This exploratory study required that I remain open to the discovery of new ideas, unanticipated themes, and concepts from within the data (Hill et al., 1997). To ensure this exploratory approach produced comprehensive findings, I engaged in a thorough data collection and analysis process. Throughout this methodology chapter, I discuss each of the criteria and the study's methodology and method components in great detail. Furthermore, to solidify the methods employed in this study, I provide additional evidence by referencing previous research (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007) that has not only shaped my understanding of the topic but also served as the driving force behind this research.

Qualitative Paradigm

This study utilized qualitative research to explore, understand, and analyze the career readiness and life after sport experiences of ICAs. Qualitative research allows researchers to uncover and explore multiple realities of a phenomenon (Bentzinger, 2016). According to Creswell (2007), "when studying individuals, qualitative researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities" (p. 18). Additionally, qualitative research allows participants to share their experiences through diverse forms and "is most concerned with the interpretation of peoples' lived experience(s)" (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 9). Creswell's (2007) definition, "we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that

often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study" (p. 40), provides additional support for my use of this methodology. Engaging with former ICAs through qualitative research allowed me to truly understand not only their perspectives on DI intercollegiate athletics but also how they navigated life beyond the walls of classrooms and athletic facilities. My positionality as a former DI ICA also added an additional layer of relationality and trust between me and the participants, some of whom I knew from our competitive days in junior and college tennis. This led to instant trust between each other and honest and open communication during the interviews. The result of such rapport and trust led to an extremely rich dataset (Campbell, 2003; Seidman, 2019) where participants truthfully voiced their opinions, concerns, and suggestions. Aware of my positionality throughout this study, as a critical scholar, I engaged in reflexivity practices during the data collection and analysis phase. I wrote memos throughout the process reflecting on my analysis of the data—writing detailed notes that went beyond simply recording data, but also capturing my thought process, reactions to the data, and any potential biases that arise during analysis (Cutcliffe, 2003). It provided me the space and freedom to acknowledge and ground my preconceptions without impacting the findings of this study (Glasser, 1998).

Overall, qualitative research enabled a rich and personalized experience that encouraged human contact and mindful sharing of experiences between the researcher and the participant (Morrow & Smith, 2000), It allowed me to explore ICA experiences, learn about all the factors that impact their career readiness, success in the workforce, and roles played by HEIs as well as internal and external stakeholders in ICA career preparation. Additionally, it allowed me to engage with all the nuances during and after interviews with participants, such as developing a comprehensive understanding of participants' identities and experiences, making their voices

heard, as well as developing a sense of awareness about my role as a researcher throughout the research process (Morrow et al., 2001).

Methodology

I utilized Generic Qualitative Research Methodology to design this study. According to Merriam (1998), generic qualitative studies are among the most common forms of qualitative education research. This methodology "is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known [or more established] qualitative methodologies" (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 4) like phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and ethnography, case study, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007). Generic qualitative research methodology seeks to understand "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). It allows the researcher to pick several or no methodological approaches and also provides the flexibility to not engage in a particular methodology's complete application of rules and guidelines (Caelli et al., 2003; Kahlke, 2014). This methodology allowed me to ask participants about their experiences as they shared narratives about their time as ICAs at DI institutions. However, by no means did I, the researcher, "interpret the stories people [told me]" (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 148). Instead, the general qualitative research methodology gave me the flexibility to "explore" a range of ICA experiences while maintaining the rigor of conducting a qualitative research project. I was able to delve deeper into their experiences and do more than just "describe" the "essence of things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 6). This flexibility of choice allowed me to ask the questions I wanted to ask, collect data the way I chose to do so, and engage in data analysis as it best fit my study without being forced to fit in a specific "big five" methodology (Creswell, 2007; Richards &

Morse, 2007). Overall, I gained a rich understanding of ICA experiences to further analyze the range of their experiences as sport labor migrants in the U.S. (Bale, 1991; Lim, 2011).

Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

Knowledge is created, built, and represented in society. According to Crotty (1998), meaning is not discovered but constructed. As a researcher with a constructionist epistemological stance, I believe individuals do not exist in a vacuum but instead exist in social settings where life is fueled by personal, social, and cultural experiences. People can construct unique individual meanings of the same situation. Thus, showing the presence of multiple realities and no one truth. I use Critical Inquiry as it aligns with my epistemological stance and the way that I view the world. Critical inquiry seeks to challenge societal norms and not accept the status quo and reads social climates in terms of understanding conflict and oppression (Crotty, 1998).

This dissertation explored ICA career readiness and transition into the workforce experiences. Often, the experiences of ICAs are unique based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, linguistic fluency, familiarity with the U.S. culture, social and cultural capital, etc. While each ICA creates meaning of their own experiences, some of the challenging experiences like language barrier issues, restrictive and exclusionary visa and immigration policy complexities are more severe for some than others (Bale, 1991; Lee & Opio, 2011; Newell, 2015). For example, most Canadians who come to the U.S. do not have communication issues as English is their first language but those from countries like Thailand and Morocco experience much more drastic transitional challenges (Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Manwell et al., 2021 Newell, 2015; Sethi & Hextrum, 2024). Also, students and athletes who identify as Black and/or Muslim from countries in Africa and the Middle East face greater discrimination and denial of visas compared to those who identify as white Europeans (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Such differences are important to acknowledge in the ICA experience as they further impact their

experience and meaning-making process in the U.S. These differences impacted my recruitment process as I sought to include diverse ICA participants in the second phase of recruitment. I discuss this in depth on page 64.

In this study, I also explore how such International Student (IS) and ICA specific challenges can be mitigated by identifying institutional and federal politics (i.e., visa, employment, and immigration) as well as by identifying ICA specific support structures and systems present within and beyond athletic departments. Lastly, like individual scholars and researchers who (1) engage with the critical inquiry theoretical perspective to understand inequities and oppression and (2) aim to provide solutions and suggestions to the issues (Crotty, 1998), I observe and analyze ICA career preparation and transition to the workforce experiences with a critical inquiry lens. Then, I pose recommendations and suggestions for U.S. HEIs, their stakeholders, the NCAA, and federal immigration authorities and offices (USCIS and SEVIS) regarding the need for equitable, inclusive, and integrative practices, policies, and structures to enhance the holistic experience of ICAs during college and beyond.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to explore, understand, and analyze the career readiness and life after sport experiences of ICAs. To do so, the study was framed and guided based on the following research questions:

RQ 1 – What are former DI ICAs' career readiness and job search experiences as they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce?

RQ 2 – What kind of resources and support systems are available to ICAs prior to graduation as they prepare to enter the workforce?

RQ 3 – What roles do stakeholders within athletic departments, U.S. HEIs, and national/federal organizations play in ICA experiences during their career preparation and transition out of sport journey?

Research Design

The generic qualitative research design of this study aimed to understand a range of experiences as well as "uncover and interpret these meanings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 25). Through this design, I investigated and understood how people perceive their experiences, construct the meaning of those experiences, and assign meaning to a set of their lived experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This design best fit the study as it provided an opportunity to explore and understand the experiences of ICAs on an individual and collective level. By carrying out a generic qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews, I was able to "jointly construct meaning" with the interviewees (Esterberg, 2002, p. 88). I was able to gather rich data about in-depth participant experiences and how they shaped, impacted, and prepared them in their personal, as well as professional journey.

Choosing this design led to a rich data collection process demonstrating unique experiences across all participants. I chose participants who fit the criteria of the study via criterion and snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Crotty 1998). Snowball sampling, especially, was a valuable technique to recruit ICAs who are not easily accessible and available (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I engaged in individual semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed me to understand ICA challenges, successes, and nuanced experiences (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Furthermore, this design's process guided me in presenting meaningful and tangible findings and suggestions for athletic departments, their stakeholders, and national/federal governing bodies regarding resources for support, inclusion, professional development, and career readiness of this college athlete population.

Participant Selection Criteria and Recruitment

The purpose of qualitative research was to gain insight into the uniqueness of former DI ICA experiences and their need for distinct resources. I wanted to do so while acknowledging not all ICAs are the same, even though often viewed and treated as a monolith. Therefore, I recruited former DI ICAs from countries around the world to understand how they, depending on their national and cultural identity, experience the U.S. differently.

Upon obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in December 2021, I first emailed potential participants, some of whom are friends and acquaintances, per a research script (Appendix A) previously submitted to IRB. Additionally, being a former DI ICA and athletic department graduate assistant myself, I had access to many former ICAs before the start of this study. I was able to recruit friends, former teammates, and alumni via direct messages on social media. I often tried to recruit these individuals to be participants in my study via a text message recruitment script (Appendix B). Since I worked with an athletic department until the summer of 2020, I did share participant recruitment email scripts with DI athletic department staff and coaches (Appendix A) who shared my study's recruitment information with their connections and former ICAs.

I recruited participants using purposeful and snowball sampling. I was intentional about leaving the call open to any nationality, race, gender, and scholarship status within all written materials and communication channels. Purposeful sampling specifically aims to recruit participants who have knowledge and/or have experienced the topic of study being explored by the researcher (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). I used purposeful sampling, specifically the combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), criterion sampling "seeks cases that meet some

criterion" (p. 159). Therefore, using this method, all participants within the study fit the following criteria: former ICAs; graduated in 2010 or later; competed at DI HEIs; country of origin was not the U.S.; and they were currently in the workforce in the U.S. or another country.

For the second recruitment phase, I chose snowball sampling since it can be key to identifying participants when researchers choose to engage with unique and minoritized student populations not easily accessible for recruitment (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2017) suggested, that "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 159) are key to identifying such a unique population. Thus, at the end of each interview, I asked participants the following questions, "Are there any ICAs you know whom I can contact to recruit for this study?" or "Is there anyone you can think of who might be interested in participating in this study?" This proved to be helpful as former ICAs I interviewed helped me get in touch with other former ICAs who showed interest and fit the study's criteria.

By February of 2023, I had interviewed 17 participants none of whom identified as Black, nor did any represent a country from the continent of Africa. None of them represented the Caribbean countries either. Diversity in nationality and race was an important factor for me to consider when discussing ICA experiences. Therefore, the absence of these specific populations was concerning to me. As previous research has shown, ISs from these regions and nations have unique and meaningful perspectives to share and thus, should be a part of the study. (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Thus, in March 2023, I updated my IRB application and added targeted social media recruitment for the second phase of data collection. I shared my study's infographic on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in the hope of recruiting participants with diverse racial identities from these countries (Appendix C). Through this recruitment phase,

two former ICAs reached out to me via Instagram and Twitter. After completing interviews with them and requesting to connect me with their friends who might be interested, I interviewed five more former ICAs, two from the continent of Africa and one from the Caribbean. Two of these three participants identified as Black. This phase was helpful for my study and led to a more nuanced data set and analysis stage, which I will discuss later in my findings and discussion chapters.

Participants

At the end of the two phases of recruitment, I interviewed 25 former DI ICAs from diverse backgrounds who graduated in 2010 or later and are currently in the workforce in the U.S. or another country (Table 1). Participants represented unique cultures, religions, and nationalities. In total, all participants cumulatively represented 18 countries and six continents. 16 participants identified as women and nine identified as men. The participants represented nine different sports like tennis, soccer, gymnastics, track and field, basketball, football, swimming, volleyball, and rugby[2] , and came to the U.S. on varied scholarship levels. 20 of the 25 former ICAs had competed for Power 5 institutions. Their names and HEIs are kept confidential, and pseudonyms have been assigned. I also decided to not disclose their organization/employer names as ICAs are a minority population in this country and such information could lead to exposure, especially for those who work in intercollegiate athletics departments. Participants were asked to share their racial and/or ethnic identity in their introduction if they wished to do so. Based on their responses, many had different concepts of race in their home countries as compared to how one is racially categorized in the U.S. Thus, few shared they were 'unsure'

[2] Rugby is not an NCAA sactioned sport. However, Jay (see table on page 67) identified himself as an NCAA DI athlete as he competed at a DI school on their elite Rugby team. He also received a scholarship, an academic one, to be an athlete for the institution and had severe athletic time demands just like his D1 peers.

how to answer this question or asked for clarification. In some cases, they felt more comfortable identifying with their nationality or continent of origin as compared to race. A couple of the participants further elaborated how they were only exposed to the concept of race while signing off on U.S. related paperwork and upon entering this country. This could have been the case since they were a well-represented racial population in their home country. Overall, some participants expressed discomfort identifying racially in the U.S. context. At times, their answers also addressed geographic regions rather than race. I have included this complexity in Table 1 using an (*) given these participants struggled to answer what is often a straightforward answer for most U.S. citizens. For those who did share their racial identity, two identified as Latinx, three as Black, six as white or European, and six as Asian.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

Name	Nationality	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Sport	Scholarship Status
Adin	India	Woman	Asian	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Anna	Chile	Woman	*	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Ashley	Brazil	Woman	Brazillian*	Soccer	Partial Scholarship
Azlan	India	Woman	Asian	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Bob	Spain	Man	Latin	Tennis	Partial Scholarship
Cameron	Great Britain	Woman	Black	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Chief	South Africa	Man	Black	Track and Field	Full Scholarship
Jack	Australia	Man	White	Football	Full Scholarship
Jay	New Zealand	Man	White/Caucasian	Rugby	Partial Scholarship
John	India	Woman	South Asian	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Kate	Greece	Woman	Greek*	Volleyball	Partial Scholarship
Maria	Great Britain	Woman	White	Swimming	Partial Scholarship
Megha	Denmark	Woman	White	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Michelle	Canada	Woman	*	Gymnastics	Partial Scholarship
Nesma	Egypt	Woman	African*	Basketball	Full Scholarship
Nicole	Indonesia	Woman	East Asian	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Nim	Australia	Woman	Australian*	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Patrick	Thailand	Man	Asian	Tennis	Partial Scholarship
Peter	Spain	Man	*	Tennis	Partial Scholarship
Romario	Jamaica	Man	Black African	Track and Field	Full Scholarship
Sam	Bolivia	Woman	Latina	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Sarah	Great Britain	Woman	White	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Shanky	India	Man	Asian	Tennis	Full Scholarship
Tom	Netherlands	Man	White	Tennis	Partial Scholarship
Victoria	Venezuela	Woman	*	Tennis	Full Scholarship

Note. The (*) in the table indicates when participants were initially hesitant or ambiguous about identifying their race. Additionally, for participants who ultimately shared their racial identity, but didn't fit neatly into the pre-defined categories, I've included their chosen terms along with the asterisk to accurately reflect their responses.

Data Collection: Interviews

Creswell (2007) believes that qualitative data collection essentially falls into one of four categories: (a) observations, (b) interviews, (c) documents, and (d) audio-visual materials. Merriam (2009) discusses how interviews are the primary source of data collection in qualitative research. Dexter (1970) describes interviews as a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 136) and Patton (2002) states, "We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 340). Engaging with former DI ICAs in interviews allowed me to find out how they felt, thought, and made meaning of their experiences in U.S. HEIs and beyond. Data collection involved engaging with former DI ICAs in a 90–120 minute semi-structured in-depth interview via the Zoom platform. Semi-structured interviews require open-ended question formats and allow researchers flexibility and freedom to explore interesting concepts and ideas (Merriam, 2009). My interview protocol (Appendix D) was a 30-question pre-written document, excluding the follow up and probing questions, that I used for the interviews. Participants were informed that additional probing questions may arise from time to time. Before diving into the conversation with participants, I read the verbal consent form (Appendix D) out loud and requested consent. Interview questions were asked in chronological order unless participants had already answered certain questions during the interview. Thus, due to the nature of qualitative research, if participants responded to a few different questions when asked one question, the flexibility, and freedom to not follow order and explore other insightful themes and realities was always an option (Merriam, 2009).

Upon gaining consent from the participants, audio and video of the Zoom conversations were recorded to the cloud via the University of Oklahoma's 'My Media' resource available to faculty and students. I also used the Zoom auto-transcription function for the first three

interviews before manually cleaning up the entire transcript to ensure fidelity. Upon receiving the 'Graduate Student Research Grant' from the NCAA in January 2022, I delegated the interview transcription responsibility to a professional transcription service provider. Once I received the transcribed files from the professionals, I did one final read and cleanup of the document, again to ensure fidelity. All transcripts were saved in password protected folders and on the cloud. For backup purposes, all interviews were audio recorded on a backup iPad specifically used for this research project, which were deleted after transcription was completed.

The interview questions of this study's interview protocol were divided into three parts to gain a better understanding of their holistic experience of coming to and graduating from U.S. HEIs (Appendix D). Each of the parts represent a specific phase of the ICA transition to U.S. HEIs or beyond—ICA recruitment phase, their on-campus experiences, and lastly, their career readiness and transition out of sport experiences. The last phase of the interview protocol remains the focus of this dissertation.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not always isolated; they are often interrelated and occur simultaneously throughout the study (Creswell, 2007). Credible data analysis should be conducted in a "precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 1). Merriam (2009) states that "qualitative research is not a linear, step-by-step process. Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity…begin[ning] with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read" (p. 165). Keeping this in mind, I gained a deep understanding of the ICA, CA, and IS literature while synthesizing it with the study's theoretical framework. This led to the development of an initial topical codebook using deductive analysis (Adair & Pastori, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (Appendix E).

Data collection and data analysis happen concurrently (Thorne, 2000). Thus, it is important to consider how the entire process is not isolated from the actual data being collected (Thorne, 2000). To analyze data for this study, I used thematic data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 1994). Specifically, Morse's (1994) process of thematic analysis is "comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing and recontextualizing" (p. 25). This process was not linear but an iterative and reflective one that constantly allowed me as the researcher to go back and forth between different analysis phases.

Throughout the interview process, I maintained a memo log to note my initial thoughts, think broadly about topical codes emerging from the literature and the data, and take note of important quotes stated by participants during the interviews. I also wrote a final reflective memo about the defining aspects of the participant's experience, unique insights, and/or similarities and differences compared to other participants (Saldaña, 2009) since memos allow researchers to "systematically reflect on your emerging research topic and research questions and relate these to your plan for data collection methods and processes" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p.95). An important aspect of writing memos was "to pay attention to the ways that your research engages critically in its approach to understanding the context… as well as to setting up a research design that seeks this and other kinds of complexity and contextualization of rigorous process of reflexive engagement and methods consideration" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 95- 96).

To engage in data analysis, I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) thematic analysis and coding model, which included six iterative phases: familiarizing yourself with your data; generating initial codes (topical coding); searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Additionally, following the advice of (Emerson et al.,

2011; Miles & Huberman,1984; Saldaña, 2009), I began with broad codes and systematically developed more fine and detailed codes as I progressed through multiple levels of the analysis.

Familiarizing myself with the data was an ongoing process that began while interviewing the participants as well as when cleaning up the transcripts for fidelity. The initial codebook was generated deductively after thorough engagement with the literature and theoretical frameworks. After all interviews were completed and transcribed, I set up the initial codebook and uploaded all transcripts to Dedoose, a web-based mixed-methods data management application. I analyzed the data using a deductive and inductive approach. I thoroughly read through all the transcribed interview transcripts and was "open to anything possible at this point" instead of reading into the data (Merriam, 2009, p. 178; Morse, 1994). This process allowed me to take notes and document my theoretical and reflective thoughts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 1994). Then, I engaged in line-by-line coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, I began expanding the codebook based on themes I found within the data and maintained an audit trail of the additional codes I generated inductively from the data, how I used them, and if I made changes (add/edit/delete) to the topical codes over time, before having a final codebook for the study (Appendix F). All codes generated during the first phase were then grouped into larger codes through the process of axial coding (Merriam, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through this process of generating larger codes after axial coding, essential themes of the study emerged. Through this process, I moved from deductive thematic analysis (topical codebook [Appendix E] and open coding) to inductive thematic analysis (axial coding) and then the development of larger themes for the data set (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). The iterative process resulted in 80 defined codes and 1651 excerpts.

I was able to compare participant experiences within and across thematically coded excerpts using several qualitative analysis tools like code co-occurrence, code application, and code and descriptor charts. The coding scheme and Dedoose were critical to analyze the qualitative differences between ICA perceptions and outcomes, differences in experience based on nationality, race, and their accumulation of forms of capital like social, cultural, and financial.

While quantitative researchers often only use the deductive process and qualitative researchers use the inductive process, many also recommend using both in qualitative research (Hyde, 2000; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Patton, 2002). Thus, for this study, a combination of inductive and deductive was particularly helpful due to my positionality as a former DI ICA who has lived through the very experience this study explored and deeply familiarized myself with the literature present on this topic.

Lastly, Patton (2002) states that "the ultimate in insider perspective comes from involving the insiders as co-researchers through collaborative or participatory research" (p. 269). While I was the solo researcher for this study, I did engage with peers for triangulation and peer de-briefing and was able to identify and make sense of the complexities ICAs share through their experiences. Thus, making the analysis process richer (Lee & Opio, 2011; Patton, 2002) to better understand ICA perspectives, their transitional challenges, and the roles of various stakeholders in their journey when ICAs prepare to transition out of DI institutions and find opportunities in the workforce.

Trustworthiness

Before writing the findings section, I engaged in researcher triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking in alignment with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model of trustworthiness. I developed codes and themes through extensive reading of the transcripts while keeping in mind the literature and theories related to this topic. "To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative

researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.1). As a critical and compassionate scholar, and an insider in this study, researcher bracketing and remaining an outsider in this work was extremely challenging. Rather, critical scholars discard the notion of bracketing as something undesirable and unattainable (Cheek, 1995, 1996; Lather, 1986; Rudge, 1996). They believe that one's positionality cannot be hidden throughout the research process and how one chooses to engage with their topic (Cheek, 1995, 1996; Lather, 1986; Rudge, 1996). Thus, I consistently engaged in reflexivity practices, like writing memos throughout the research process, to acknowledge and minimize the potential influence of my own biases, experiences, and assumptions on the interpretation of the data and the research findings.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, trustworthiness is used to establish reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2018). There are four ways of establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2018). Triangulation is an important aspect of establishing credibility and dependability in a qualitative study (Bailey, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2018). I engaged in triangulation of certain sections of the transcripts with peers. We agreed with our codes and themes 95% of the time. For the transferability of this study, I provided detailed descriptions and took notes of the research context information shared with me by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish dependability, I am now able to show others how this study can be consistently replicated in the future by logging all my steps and decision making via audit trails throughout this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). To establish trustworthiness and enhance confirmability, I have attached my positionality statement (Appendix G) which describes my place within the study and expresses the experiences, biases, and assumptions I bring to this work.

To enhance the credibility and conformability of this study, I completed member checking and peer de-briefing. Member checking involved sharing the final version of the transcripts with my participants as a means of ensuring validity (Bailey, 2007). Due to participants' busy work and life schedules, I incorporated member checking into the interviews themselves as much as possible and repeated back/asked questions about my interpretation and/or implications of what they were saying to avoid misconstruing their intended meaning. These follow-up questions served a dual purpose. Firstly, they acted as a data triangulation technique, allowing me to cross-check information and gain deeper insights into participant responses. Secondly, they prompted participants to elaborate on their initial answer, potentially clarifying intentions, addressing disagreements, and offering additional details. This open dialogue also gave both of us a platform to discuss the boundaries of their data—what they wished to be included or excluded (such as specific incidents involving others). We also discussed how I would best present their stories in the final findings. To strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of my analysis and add critical rigor to my interpretations, I embraced diverse feedback throughout the research journey. Peer debriefing sessions with my dissertation committee members and external scholars (three faculty members at another institution and a fellow graduate student) played a vital role in this process. Drawing on expertise within and beyond my field (Bailey, 2007), these discussions not only enhanced the theoretical depth of my findings but also served as a valuable check on potential biases, ensuring a more robust and well-

rounded analysis. Overall, this process eliminates chances of bias and ensures the "accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 261).

Ethical Considerations

This study aimed to engage in conversations with former DI ICAs without causing any psychological and emotional harm (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, to hold the information they share as sacred and be considerate about keeping their stories confidential. My intentions and actions aligned with Moustakas (1994) in affirming that "human science researchers are guided by the ethical principles on research with human participants" (p. 109). Thus, this study was approved by the IRB, which serves to minimize ethical concerns throughout each phase of the study. During participant recruitment and data collection, I adhered to all IRB rules by asking for consent and reiterating that participation was voluntary. I made it clear to the participants that responding to any question was a personal choice.

Lastly, all data files were securely saved on the cloud in password protected folders. Backup files were saved on a research project-specific iPad and an external hard drive with a security lock. Since participants' identity was crucial to this study, the following efforts were made to protect their identity: participant information was always kept confidential; participants were asked to choose a preferred name for the study; participant, institutional, and employer names were de-identified in the transcript before sharing with peers during triangulation; participants were allowed to pass/not answer any question throughout the interview. Overall, these steps allowed participants to feel comfortable sharing valuable and truthful information while staying de-identified within the study.

Introduction to Findings

Deconstructing the American Dream – America, A Land of Opportunities?

Often, international students (ISs) view the U.S. as a land of opportunities and are inspired by the 'American Dream' (Wang, 2020). This dream is the belief that those coming to this country can achieve a better life if they work hard and are true to their craft (Wang, 2020). Envisioning this desired outcome, immigrants, including many international college athletes (ICAs), choose to leave their homelands to study, work, live, and/or play sports in the U.S., all while aiming to make a better life for themselves and their families. More specifically, ICAs move to the U.S. because of the opportunity to simultaneously play elite-level sports and get a world-class education—an opportunity not available in most countries around the world due to the presence of widespread club sports models (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2009). Additionally, many pursue this path due to the potential to receive a scholarship for their education and athletic endeavors, and the presence of world-class athletic facilities as portrayed by coaches during recruitment. However, with the political and social environment in the U.S. around immigrant rights and immigration policy, the American dream does not come true for many. Instead, choosing to compete in the U.S. often leads to exploitation, exclusion, discrimination, and disappointment. This hurts ICA experiences and falls short of their expectations and perceptions of this country and its people.

Throughout this study, participants shared feelings and experiences about their preconceived notions of America and the different realities they experienced upon arriving at U.S. HEIs. They discussed how coaches recruited them from across the world, promising the delivery of a world-class athletic and academic experience that would prepare them to be successful in life beyond sports. They were not, however, presented the full picture about the

college athlete (CA) experience during their recruitment, and therefore believed there were false promises made to them by U.S. HEIs and coaches. This eventually led to unfulfilling experiences during their intercollegiate athletic careers that impacted their life beyond the walls of the academy.

Romario, a Black Jamaican track and field ICA, was one of the many participants who experienced the disconnect between what was presented during recruitment and the reality after arriving to compete in the U.S. He also realized the reality of life in the U.S. is not the one he saw on TV and heard about from others. His entire journey, from the decision to come to the U.S. until today, is a prime example of how a perception versus reality disconnect plays out for many ICAs. As a young man in Jamaica, all he ever wanted to do was go to America and pursue a career in running. This is how society conditioned him. He was one of the best track and field athletes in his country and wanted to continue to improve further. However, he did not have the financial resources to travel the world to train, compete, and gain exposure to world-class competition. The lack of funds and other resources like the quality of coaches and facilities made him believe going to the U.S. could solve these problems. Consequently, getting a full scholarship offer from a DI institution after attending a summer camp in the U.S., a trip funded by his community on his behalf, felt like a dream come true. However, it was not long before his 'American Dream' was shattered post-completion of his college degree. Even though he was told by coaches he could stay back in the U.S. and run professionally after graduation, he was unable to do so. He was not even able to use his degree to pursue his professional goals to find employment in the U.S. Instead, he navigated numerous obstacles to remain in the U.S. after graduating—discussed throughout chapters four and five.

Every phase of this journey in the U.S. brought its layered complexities for all ICAs, including Romario. When I asked Romario what he knew about the American college athletics experience before coming to America, he honestly shared**,**

> We didn't care, we just sign [NLI]. We going to America? We sign right on the dotted line, we don't care if they're going to take our foot, legs, we sign anything, man. America has a lot of opportunities and staying back in Jamaica, there's no opportunity at all, whatsoever.

His perception of the U.S. and its sporting environment was a result of the successful people he saw on TV and the success stories he had heard. Living in Jamaica, he was made to believe that going to America would make all his personal and professional dreams come true. However, after reaching the U.S., living the CA life, and getting closer to graduation, he experienced a completely different reality. He indicated it was one of the most stressful times in his life since he lacked knowledge of the U.S. workforce and immigration system, and received no support from his coaches, institution, or athletics staff. When I asked him how he was supported by campus and the athletic department during this transition phase, he stated:

> To be honest, people didn't care like literally. They don't care at all, once you're about to leave, they ask you, what are you going to do after this? You just tell them, I don't know. I probably just going to apply for this and this job, this and that, and they be like, okay.

This lack of support represented a stark contrast to the dream he both imagined and was sold during recruitment, in part due to this lack of career readiness support he received during his college athletics and academic career. This led to no employment opportunities upon graduation and forced Romario to arrange a fake marriage to stay in America post-graduation. This was the

only option brought to his attention at that time. When I asked him why he made such a drastic decision, he said "just so I could stay in America." He further explained the context behind his decision to get married,

> If you can't find a job that will help you get your green card, which I didn't, then everybody (people in the Jamaican community through connections) resort to just getting fake marriage… to get the green card, and so that was some of the transition that I had to do, a couple of friends had to do the same. We had no option.

Eventually, the fake marriage let him find a job and stay in the U.S. but ended in divorce upon receiving the green card. "Thankfully, I didn't have to give it [green card] back," he said, which then allowed him to pursue a job in the U.S. Army after becoming a U.S. citizen. Joining the armed forces was not something he wanted to do, but realized it was one of the few things he felt he could do that was related to his major (criminology). This allowed him to make ends meet to continue to live in America. This outcome, one he did not desire, was the opposite of what he had planned to pursue as his "American Dream". In addition to a lack of career readiness, and a "niche" academic degree, injuries and lack of sponsorship left him stranded without a professional athletic or workforce career right after graduation.

Romario's story, while impactful, is merely a single thread in the complex tapestry of ICAs'' experiences in the U.S. The study unveils a broader picture, exposing a confluence of factors shaping ICA's journeys. Many ICAs arrived with an idealized version of American life in their heads and lacked awareness and knowledge about life in the U.S., its visa and immigration restrictions, as well as post-graduation legal and professional complexities of living in this country. Before arriving in the U.S. for the first time, they could not fathom the difficulty and

hardships one often faces in managing and navigating these complexities alone, especially for those identifying as people of color in the U.S. This study's participants placed the blame squarely on coaches, athletic department staff, institutions, and the NCAA for a lack of support and guidance.

This highly recruited yet underserved minority population faced a lot of challenges as they approached graduation. All participants shared they felt underprepared due to a lack of career readiness guidance provided by various institutional stakeholders and the NCAA. They had little to no knowledge about workforce opportunities in the U.S. and were unfamiliar with post-graduation visa options. Overall, they felt uneducated and betrayed due to the lack of support and guidance they received along the way, especially at a crucial juncture in their lives, when most were at the peak of their athletic careers and between ages 18-23. During this phase, when career readiness guidance and support are crucial for professional growth, ICAs felt like were exploited for their athletic ability to build intercollegiate athletics programs, strengthen institutional brands, build IS and ICA pipelines, and add to the U.S. economy. While providing immense gains to U.S. HEIs, this extraction of athletic labor left all participants unprepared for life after sport. They were stranded post-graduation trying to navigate their way through the next steps of life.

This career readiness and transition out of sport (job search) phase was a hard reality for many participants of this study. The findings chapters dive deep into both these phases of the participants' lives. Chapter 4 delves into ICA career readiness and professional development experiences, their sense of awareness and knowledge or lack thereof about post-college life in the U.S., and the presence or lack thereof of career readiness support systems, services, and structures at the personal, institutional, and national level. Chapter 5 explores the ICA transition

out of sport, especially as it pertains to their job search and career navigation journey. I share participants' job search experiences, especially of those who continue to reside in the U.S. and the role of social and financial capital in navigating life after graduation. Additionally, findings also reveal how ICAs who currently reside in the U.S. navigate continued legal complexities, challenges, and exploitation. The impact of legal issues and exploitation runs throughout the entirety of their experiences and this document. Focusing on the career preparation and job search aspect of the transition out of sport phase is intentional and does not mean underplaying other experiences and challenges ICAs face with social, physical, emotional, and mental health such as identity issues, injury management, eating disorders, cultural adjustments, and financial hardships. However, using a sport labor migration lens, the findings paint a picture of ICA career readiness and job search journeys —an integral arm of the holistic development experience promised to ICAs by the NCAA and its member institutions.

Chapter 4: Findings Part I - International College Athlete Career Readiness and Support Services and Structures

In this chapter, I specifically discuss the lack of awareness international college athletes (ICAs) have about life in the U.S. and on U.S. college campuses. I analyze how it negatively impacted ICAs' career readiness journeys. By sharing participant narratives, I show how there is a dire need for structure and roadmaps to better support this population through their time in U.S. HEIs so they can begin to prepare for their next steps beyond college. I bring attention to the experiences ICAs have with specific structures and stakeholders within intercollegiate athletics and U.S. HEIs—the NCAA, student affairs offices, and athletic departments, amongst others, to share how they engage in programming, or lack thereof, to serve and guide this population. Since legal issues continue to be a critical aspect of each ICA's life, I discuss how international student services (ISS) offices and its members engage with this population. While the perception and expectations remain that support systems and structures should be engaging in intentional work to prepare this population for a successful career after college, the reality is otherwise. This led to participants expressing the importance of their own personal and professional support networks which provided better guidance for the next steps toward entering the workforce. ICAs also discussed the importance of relying on themselves during the tough transition instead of relying on institutional support systems and structures to prevent disappointment.

Lastly, I share how participants experienced severe athletic time demands, which reduced their ability to engage in career readiness workshops and opportunities if any were provided at their institutions. Such instances and more shared in this chapter, show how career readiness of ICAs, like most domestic college athletes (DCAs), is not prioritized within DI athletic departments. In essence, the absence of career guidance and structured support wasn't merely a

hurdle for these participants; it was a gaping hole in their young adulthood, a void that could potentially define their future. This crucial phase in their development, one with the power to impact the rest of their lives, was severely neglected by athletic departments and stakeholders, leaving many ICAs found themselves unprepared for the realities of life after graduation.

Lack of Awareness and Career Preparation Roadmap

All participants shared they lacked awareness about the reality of studying and living in the U.S. They entered U.S. HEIs with a significant lack of knowledge about navigating life in college and beyond. They grappled with understanding the severe demands of balancing sports and academics, unaware that staying in the U.S. after graduation may not be an option. This lack of awareness extended to vital support systems and career preparation resources, leaving them unprepared for the workforce. Cameron, a Black women's tennis player from Great Britain exclaimed, "You don't know what's going to happen. You're 20. You have to be trusting of people around you and the system you kind of go into, because what other choice do you have?" Sam, a Latina women's tennis player from Bolivia echoed similar sentiments, "I had no idea how much tennis I was going to play, no idea. I didn't know how to schedule classes and had no clue what I was going to do after I graduate." Participants were uninformed about their majors, its impact on their careers, and lacked the crucial skills to find jobs in the U.S. or another country. The absence of a clear roadmap and support structure from those who work with this population right at the outset of their programs was a widespread issue, leaving ICAs adrift and unsure of how to navigate life post-graduation. Tom, a white men's tennis player from the Netherlands, shared how he felt lost after ending his tennis career:

> Because tennis was always the easy one…. so, what do you do now?... studies were secondary in the beginning for me than tennis. And that flipped in the last two years, but

> as we're not from the States, you don't know where to start or whether your future lies there. It was much more a bit of a rougher landscape to navigate.

Closer to graduation, Nicole, an East Asian women's tennis player from Indonesia, also questioned "tennis season is done, oh, wow, so, now what?... So, I want to stay here [U.S.] but I don't know what to do like what should I do?" This lack of both knowledge and guidance from those within U.S. HEIs and its various stakeholders created a pervasive sense of uncertainty and hampered their ability to prepare and plan for a future in the workforce.

Almost all the participants did not know about career readiness and IS resources, immigrant paperwork timelines, potential work-related opportunities to stay in the U.S., and the visa and immigration complexities that come with it. They were also frustrated about how they were not educated through any programmatic effort, which let them stay blind to these issues. Anna's, a women's tennis player from Chile, lack of awareness about support systems and programs were very apparent as she stated:

> I did not seek any help or support at all. I think I didn't know that existed. Honestly, I feel like I was never given the tools of like, hey, we have this in the athletic department. You can reach these people if you need help. That was never given to me or explained to me. So, I did not know staying back [in the U.S.] was an option.

Patrick, Asian men's tennis player from Thailand, also expressed

> I didn't even know how [much] longer we could stay… I didn't know anything about that gap or the time that we could have spent more days [in the U.S.] to figure out what we wanted to do or to find a job. I didn't know how long we have [in the U.S.] after we finished school.

In response to their lack of awareness and support system remarks, many participants articulated the dire need for career navigation roadmaps and education sessions to raise career readiness awareness. Bob, a Latin men's tennis player from Spain articulated what would have been helpful for him as he was trying to navigate the next steps in the U.S:

> You need guidance at least through something, then, you will find your way. But you need someone that is there, you know? Like, uh, like an advisor or something that at least is going to tell you what to do or, okay at least show me the steps that I need to take, and I will take the steps, but at least show me…I am coming from another different country. I haven't been here in my life, you know. How [does] the government work in order for me to stay in the U.S. after college? You know? What do I need to do? What are the requirements? At least, something to help me.

While some participants were unaware of the option to stay in the U.S. and how to navigate seeking career readiness-related opportunities on campus and beyond, John, an Asian women's tennis player from India, was aware that staying was an option, but she lacked awareness about complex legal procedures like visa and immigration policies, different work authorization permits, and their timelines until closer to graduation. She mentioned,

> I didn't know it was so hard to stay in the U.S., right? I had no idea about like the whole H1B thing. All of that like hit me at the same time and I had no idea. So, first thing I did was like I found out about the OPT May of my senior year. So, like a month before graduation. I didn't know like how you stay here for longer. Oh, well, and then I applied for it…So the transition was rough, I would say.

The H-1B visa is a nonimmigrant work visa that allows U.S. employers to hire immigrant workers with specialized skills to work in the U.S. for a specific period. However, its limited

annual quota triggers a lottery system, leaving many qualified applicants hanging in the balance and making it even more important for institutions and athletic departments to provide ICAs with a roadmap and career readiness structure. Additionally, the optional practical training (OPT), John referred to is a temporary work authorization program for ISs on F-1 visas. It lets them gain real-world experience in their field of study, for up to 12 months, with potential 2-year extensions for STEM graduates. Learning about these and then filing this paperwork is a learning curve, and it impacted the participants in this study. This process requires a structured and timely approach from the applicant's end. Plus knowing what to apply for, when to apply, and how to do it ethically is critical.

Experiences like John's, where someone is making decisions and filing paperwork at the last moment, can be extremely stressful. Jay, a white rugby athlete from New Zealand, was another participant who had preexisting knowledge about post-grad visa types, however, felt his lack of knowledge about the U.S. immigration system, its timelines, and processes hurt his experience as he approached graduation. Hix experience navigating these bureaucracies made him question his choice of coming to America. He stated:

> I look back on it and I was very naive every step of the way and so I don't really know what was going to go into it. In my head, I was like oh, I'll get an OPT and then I'll go on to an H1B after… looking back on it, I don't know if I would have come to America if I knew what was going to come into this. It has chewed me up and spit me out.

Azlan, an Asian women's tennis player from India had similar experiences as well and was left frustrated about her lack of awareness, which ended up impacting her career choices to this day.

Referring to the 2-year extension of OPT provided only to STEM degree holders, which she found out after graduation, she stated:

> I didn't know anything about majors, or OPT, or how much time you get to stay in America because of this and that and whatnot. Why would I know that coming from India? Had I known earlier, I would have done management and analytics… or anything that was a STEM degree… I didn't know and I don't think people know that there's a difference between the OPT system based on degree. I would also have liked to know how everything you will work in right after you graduate has to be directly related to your field of study and impacts your fucking duration of stay.

Azlan's frustration, like many others in this study, showed how participants were unaware of many aspects of their post-college life pathways and wished they were educated about these nuances and opportunities that exist in an IS's life in the U.S.

In addition to the personal lack of awareness about navigating life on campus and potential opportunities upon graduation, career readiness roadmaps to support ICA self-learning and career preparation to enter the workforce were also missing. None of the ICAs knew how to enroll in classes, set up appointments with career development advisors, apply for internships, or get involved in on-campus programming and leadership initiatives to grow as a student and leader. Some did not even know resources like these existed on their college campuses due to the nature of the athletics-specific bubble where all college athletes (CAs) remain confined.

In retrospect, ICAs realized the importance and articulated the need for roadmaps that provide all the relevant information, opportunities, support resources, and structural complexities

and procedures to support this minoritized population, especially ICAs in their career readiness trajectory. Tom, for instance, highlighted the ideal scenario:

> Start by having a designated kind of road map for that [career readiness and planning to find a job in the U.S.] and start early about and informing us what the possibilities are, because those four years fly by…Showing the options that are out there instead of having to scramble and figure it out would be nice.

The importance of such roadmaps was further emphasized by Tom's story about a former teammate,

> One of my old teammates Russian teammates he was I think just a few days late figuring out the OPT situation, he didn't know about it, then didn't get his OPT and he would have loved to stay in the U.S., but then was forced to leave the country and wasn't even able to use his OPT after graduation.

Knowledge of visa and immigration procedures, including their timelines, could have been life-changing for Tom's friend. However, the lack of awareness forced him to return home. Bob echoed similar sentiments regarding the need for roadmaps to support a smooth post-athletic transition of ICAs,

> They [athletic departments] should create like a map of, international freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year…freshman year, this person should be attending this because this person needs to know this…junior this stage and senior guy this one, ready to go and make, whatever decision they want to make with their lives.

Almost all ICAs articulated the need for education to better understand the route to enter the U.S. workforce and its legal and federal complexities. Azlan's experience during a networking night

exemplifies this gap. Employers discussed their work environments, but as Azlan poignantly stated, “This guy from Coca-Cola was telling us what it is like working for them… I already knew that…I needed him to tell me how to stay here.” Looking back, Azlan realized coaching her on how to stay back in the U.S. was not the employer’s job but the athletic department and/or ISS’s role during her time in college. Her experience alluded to the need for an education model/program from athletic departments and/or institutions that starts early in the career of ICAs and provides them with relevant legal and workforce preparation-related information. Kate also expressed,

> No one told me about that [important things to know and do to live in the U.S. long term] and I had to figure it out. Like how I can get a social security number…this was not until they asked me for an SSN [Social Security Number] at my internship. And I was like can I get one? Like I didn't even know that.

This lack of awareness clubbed with the lack of education provided by institutional stakeholders led to chaos before she was able to apply for and receive her SSN, creating delays in her employment.

Overall, the absence of clear guidance and structure for ICAs both upon arrival and approaching graduation, coupled with their existing lack of understanding in navigating U.S. higher education and post-graduation professional options, created a persistent knowledge gap that hindered their career readiness. All participants emphasized the crucial need for roadmaps specifically designed to guide ICAs through various aspects of their lives, empowering and preparing them to achieve career success.

Support Systems and Structures

All participants were asked to share their experiences regarding career readiness guidance and support at a national, institutional, athletic department, and personal level. Most of them

discussed their experiences with the NCAA, their campus student affairs offices, ISS, academic departments, and athletic department support systems and structures. They also emphasized the importance of personal support systems, which seemed to be most beneficial to them as they navigated their journeys to prepare for careers beyond college sports.

The NCAA

The NCAA, serving as the national governing body of intercollegiate athletics, aims to provide a world-class athletics and academic experience for CAs that fosters lifelong well-being. Its responsibilities include creating programs for athletes that support outstanding performance on and off the field as well as co-creating and distributing best practices for all CAs at member institutions (NCAA, 2024). However, many ICAs in this study were not fully aware of the organization and its responsibilities towards its member institutions. All but three ICAs were unaware of the NCAA's functions. Azlan, a former NCAA 'Woman of the Year' nominee shared "I don't really know what the NCAA does. I know that it's the governing, but I don't know what they would do." Looking back, all participants expressed a desire to communicate with the NCAA to share their disappointment. The absence of any ICA-specific career readiness and holistic development programming provided by the NCAA did not go unnoticed by this population. They recognized the impact the NCAA could have had on their professional growth as compared to the lack of influence this organization has had on their career trajectories. Megha, a white women's tennis player from Denmark, mentioned

> I think I need to know more about, what the NCAA is, and what, what power do they actually have…I'm sure they have some power in bringing the athletes together and preparing them for a life after sport if they actually cared enough.

She further added that even though she was an active member of the campus community that supports ICAs, she tried to stay in touch with her Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) to learn about any new updates related to athlete support and mental health but "never heard anything about any program, the programming or any professional development from the NCAA specific to us." The lack of effort and care toward the ICA population from the NCAA left Nicole and many other participants vexed. This lack of recognition and understanding of the NCAA shown by former ICAs is alarming, to say the least. It exemplifies how irrelevant the NCAA has been in their journey as a national governing body. While they seem to express highly impactful mission statements and priorities of service (NCAA, 2024), they remain invisible and unavailable to support those who they say matter most.

In addition to the NCAA's overall lack of presence and insufficient support in career navigation, it was evident that they failed to act as per their own organizational mission. No specific programmatic efforts were laid out by the NCAA to support the holistic ICA experience. While programs like the "Student-Athlete Leadership Forum" and "Career in Sports Forum" exist, they are often inaccessible to a majority of CAs, not just ICAs, due to a highly selective process that also lacks transparency. Only conference offices and athletics departments can nominate 1-5 individuals for the forums at the DI level. Additionally, for the minimal programs and post-athletics career awards that do exist, the NCAA made no effort to build partnerships and relationships with athletic departments and/or CAs, especially with ICAs who are new to the college sports world, to share their initiatives and efforts. Notably, 22 of the 25 participants in this study knew nothing about any of these NCAA programs and awards. The only three participants who had some knowledge about the NCAA, it's functioning, and programmatic efforts, did so through their position on their athletic department SAAC, a committee made up of

CAs who interact with other athletes on their campus and provide insights to staff and administrators about the overall college athlete experience. Some of these CAs also report to the NCAA from time to time to offer input on the rules, regulations, and policies that affect CAs' lives. However, even after being an integral member of SAAC at one of the institutions, John shared:

> I had heard about it rarely…I think they could have done a better job about telling you about applying to certain post-grad rewards and things like that or like nominations because after I was done, I was like I wish I found out about these nominations or these awards or things like that much earlier. And like none of that was ever heard of. And like, I was the president of SAAC and I'm like what the heck? Like we never really talked about it… How would my fellows ever know if I didn't as the President?

The NCAA not only failed in honoring its self-proclaimed mission, but participants also found the NCAA to be exploitative in nature. Participants also found it ironic that the NCAA neither prepares ICAs for post-athletic transitions nor hires them within their organization even though it portrays ICAs as an important sub-population within CAs. Azlan expressed how it is well known and "almost an implicit policy" that the NCAA does not sponsor immigrant work visas, and thus believed it could be a reason why "they don't prepare us because they won't hire us." To underscore the exploitative and inequitable nature of the existing NCAA policy, Azlan conveyed her profound disappointment through strong nods, emphasizing the need for just and equitable treatment for ICAs, not preferential treatment based solely on there is status. She stated,

> They just don't think it's important enough to hire someone who has the expertise to do this work and support people like us you know? They don't consider it, because they have been doing this, and getting away, but also because of the political views around the fact that, you know, why should we allow immigrants to come and take our jobs and this and that? And like, I think it starts at the top right? Like, do the NCAA executives actually care about the fact that immigrants should have equal rights for jobs?

Further, she highlighted,

> The NCAA, they can change that [career readiness programs and equitable employment rights], and advocate for that, and show how important international student-athletes are. But, you know, one day of student-athlete engagement people bringing fucking, Chick-fil-A nuggets, to celebrate from 4:00 to 5:00 pm, is not enough, you know? We eat Chick-fil-A nuggets for International Athlete Day. (laughs) Like, that's just not enough for me, to support you, with your career and job situation. But meanwhile, we grind our lives this way for the NCAA and work so hard…but I don't think they're bought into what our lives are going to look like in the future. It's like if you figure it out, you figure it out. If not, there's, there's no real help. We're not saying to the NCAA like get us the job. We are just saying, create an equal playing field [referring to career readiness and professional development opportunities] for us to then go out there and get the job we want.

Such articulated expectations by Azlan were also echoed by others and are telling of how ICAs are sick of the performative actions performed by the NCAA and its member institutions.

Instead, Azlan explicitly stated the need for support and guidance where it really matters: "availability of programming, networking and internship opportunities and building connections with alumni." Concerning the exploitation theme, a few of the participants also discussed ICAs' exclusion from Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL). They believed this newer legislation, which allows most CAs to monetize on their NIL and profit from their personal brand by entering endorsement deals, signing autographs, appearing in advertisements, or creating their own content, is a beneficial pathway to prepare for life after sport. Participants discussed the potential benefits of participating in NIL collaborations. These benefits included gaining experience with various business models, developing professional relationships, and acquiring knowledge of organizational regulations and structures. However, the little to no involvement of ICAs in NIL and the NCAA's lack of official pronouncements on this topic were cited by participants as evidence of a perceived disregard for the well-being and holistic development of CAs by the governing body. It further showed "we are being used" stated Chief, a Black men's track and field athlete from South Africa. He expressed strong concerns regarding the perceived inequities in the current NIL legislation and argued that the legislation creates an uneven playing field for ICAs compared to their DCAs. Further, he questioned

> Why are you going to allow American people to do the NIL but then international students are not allowed to? If the local people at least they can do it, why can't internationals do it? Why can't they just make it for everyone that's part of it, not just specifically for those things… I just feel like they forget about the immigration stuff and then they just focus on what's going to be comfortable for some of the Americans, but they forget about international people.

Jay concurred with these concerns and elaborated on his belief that the NCAA's focus on athletic performance without corresponding advocacy for equal rights for ICAs suggested an exploitative dynamic. He expressed,

> I'm pissed off by the NCAA for how they've treated international athletes. The NCAA loves to be quiet on things. They take the belief of "we're not going to make a decision unless we need to." But, I think they need to. The NCAA is a multi-billion-dollar business at this point, call it non-profit or not, but if anyone thinks they don't have lobbying power is kidding themselves. They have huge power and have monopolized college athletics space in America and they still aren't banging on the Department of Homeland Security's door saying, "hey, we've got 25,000 international student-athletes that can't make any money or can't eat, because they can't work, can you guys fix this?" Like they haven't done it once and so I have no faith in the NCAA. I think they don't care unless it's in their best interest, because here's the thing, if they did that, they don't see anything change for them as a business and so they don't care. They only care about what benefits the NCAA and what benefits the constituents of the NCAA. But they don't care about us as people so that's what pissed me off about the NCAA, it's that they are all talk …they're full of shit so that annoys me that they have full power to lobby, they're probably one of the biggest lobbying groups in America, and they just do nothing. So frustrating.

Jay's anger, frustration, sadness, and disappointment with this organization are visible in his narration. He shared how he was tired of "working" for this organization that silently abides by unfair laws and policies and further perpetuates harm to the ICA population.

Lastly, the NCAA's legislation and actions did not only have implications in the U.S. but also in different countries around the world. Many ICAs discussed their inability to freely compete in competition outside the U.S. due to the NCAA's amateurism policy, which often impacts one's athletic eligibility to compete in college sports. However, amongst the 25 participants, Anna was the only one who interestingly discussed how her professional growth was hindered due to the NCAA's amateurism policy, which restricts her from playing professional and prize money club tournaments in her home country. She mentioned,

> I think it would be nice for them [NCAA] to make it easier for international students to go back home and compete in their sports whenever they're at home… I think that would be a good option for international people to have competing abilities in their own country. I think that's very important to build a network for professional growth.

Additionally, she went on to question the NCAA's intentions and why they continue to choose to employ people to surveil ICA engagement in professional competition across the globe but do not choose to invest funds to support and coach ICAs in their career readiness journey.

Though monitoring and restricting ICA's whereabouts and actions isn't exclusive to the NCAA in the presence of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Anna's observation regarding NCAA control extending beyond U.S. borders shed light on another dimension of the NCAA's restrictive practices on athletes' personal, professional, and career development. This disconnect underscores the stark contrast between the "holistic intercollegiate athletics experience" promised during recruitment and the reality, that falls short in preparing young adults for a successful life beyond sports.

U.S. College Campuses

Numerous departments and offices impact an ICA's life on U.S. HEI campuses, especially at the DI level due to the additional resources available at these institutions. These include student affairs, campus programming offices, academic departments, and international student services. These offices should offer career readiness support and guidance to ICAs. However, almost all participants lacked support from these entities. They left ICAs uneducated and unprepared for navigating their next steps after college. Many did not know how to leverage support services like career development and IS programming if they existed at their institutions. While some of the institutions did have career development offices that hosted basic programming sessions occasionally, none of the schools had an ICA/IS-specific program or structure in place to provide space for career exploration for ICAs. Chief used a great analogy to explain his experience as an underserved minoritized individual in a new country. He described "it's like having somebody in your house from another family who you invited but you don't even feed them while they are visiting." He used this analogy to portray how excited his coach and athletic program were to recruit him since he was ranked in the top 10 in the world. However, they failed to deliver a comparable level of care and support, as shared and promised, upon arrival to campus. Azlan's experience at a campus career fair exemplified the challenges faced by ICAs during career readiness events. As she recounted

> I went to like one engagement, career fair… I spoke to three employers. All of them said no to me because I was international and that hiring me wouldn't be possible… I was like, this is not very beneficial, this is not where I'm going to be getting a job so I should leave.

While this experience shows a great description of how ICAs are not supported, rather, discriminated against, in the U.S. It further highlights a broader issue— the lack of consideration for IS and ICA work authorization constraints when organizing career fairs. Several participants reported similar experiences of repeated rejection due to their immigration status as well.

Many participants shared that their student affairs and career development offices hosted resume, cover letter, mock interview, LinkedIn, and social etiquette workshops. Most said they were either unaware or could not attend it due to athletic responsibilities. Nim, an Australian women's tennis player, Cameron, and a few others were able to attend a few workshops and found them helpful at times for getting career fair documents like resumes and cover letters ready. However, many felt like they lacked immigrant-specific information and individualized support during these sessions. ICAs also expressed their wish to be educated and coached about employer navigation and selection—how to filter employers based on immigration criteria, how to tackle "need for sponsorship" questions, and how to target employers known to hire ISs instead of wasting one's time applying to over 200 jobs. Participants addressed how they were never informed about such nuances to consider when preparing for the workforce. They assumed one of the reasons for this could be because they only ever remember engagements with mostly white American support staff. Participants believed these individuals rarely knew or chose to understand the IS complexities and how that impacts their transition out of sport. ICAs, especially those whose first language was not English, also expressed their need for slow and in-depth mock interview practice sessions as compared to their domestic peers who seemed more comfortable with that facet of the job search process. However, their requests and needs for more specialized support were never met. Often, they could not follow along nor take note of important things to consider during the limited number of sessions offered on some campuses.

For those who did not have any opportunities through campus initiatives to engage in such programming, they were left dependent on programming provided by their athletics department which was often nonexistent.

For several ICAs, particularly those in business, engineering, and journalism programs, their academic departments became a valuable source of career support and individual growth. Tom, Azlan, Kate, a Greek women's volleyball athlete, Michelle, a Canadian women's gymnast, and Jack, a white Australian football player, mentioned receiving crucial guidance from faculty and staff within their academic programs and departments. This support went beyond academics, helping them connect with potential employers, understand the job search landscape, and identify effective resources. Jack was especially grateful for his institution's business school career development officer. He referred to him as a "legend" and stated:

> I owe him a lot. He helped me a lot with my internship. I'd send him a resume draft or a cover letter draft for a job I was applying to and I'd be like, "hey, I know this is really short notice but really good opportunity." He'd send it back to me straight away. This was unlike any other guidance and support I was offered during college.

Jack followed up by sharing that in a challenging landscape during the peak of COVID-19 and a widespread financial crisis when employers were refraining from sponsoring visas and internship opportunities, "the legend [business school career development officer] was really helpful and supportive in actually navigating this whole job market." Jack's experience and appreciation for his career development officer shows how even one person, let alone an entire office or organization, can truly change the course of an ICA's life by providing them with appropriate guidance. Sarah's, a white women's tennis player from Great Britain, institution also

had a unique resource they used for professional development purposes. They had an alumni network with different population demographics who were willing to help current students with future professional opportunities. The school developed relationships with these alumni over the years so they could provide a professional yet safe community for all current students. Sarah shared

> One thing that did help a lot was I really had no idea what I wanted to do. So, having the alumni network set up was really helpful…lots of different networking events and I think that at least helped me feel like that was this alumni sort of family that I could learn from.

She then went on to share how a few women from these networking events mentored her as she pursued the next steps in her career. No other participants shared similar resources available on their campus, indicating either none exist, or ICAs are not informed or guided to utilize them.

Some participants even shared they did not have sufficient career readiness resources and programs within any campus department to help support their career aspiration pathways. Their schools had limited funding to help students, especially ISs, with any individualized career readiness opportunities. This was especially true for lower-resourced DI HEIs. It forced some of the participants to find their own sources of support to navigate life's next steps. For example, Tom shared,

> The only help that I had was called the Business Scholars [an extracurricular group]…and at that point the professors, because they know you're extra involved, they know I was very keen on being there and improving yourself. So, one of those professors was willing to help me set up some meetings wherever she could assist to connect with employers.

Engaging with his professors taught Tom a lot about his major and how it can align with his career goals. Chief also mentioned he received all the career advice from his professor who later wrote recommendation letters for all his job applications. Without his support, Chief would have been completely lost in the job search process. Additionally, Sam sought the support and guidance of her former supervisor at the multicultural center on campus. She stated:

> She had no idea what the hell was going on with athletics, but she was a rock for me in terms of how to put yourself out, how to talk to people, what to say when you are nervous during an interview, etc. She was African American, so she knew what it was like to be a minority coming into an interview, so she gave me a lot of tips on that.

Addressing the racial identity and underrepresented identity of her supervisor and mentor was important to Sam as a Latina Bolivian woman who often felt invisible and excluded during the job search in the U.S. Like Sam, many others from diverse and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as Azlan, John, Nesma, an African women's basketball player from Egypt, Adin, an Asian women's tennis player from India, Shanky, an Asian men's tennis player from India, and Chief, built trust and confidence within individuals from campus, often a person of color, to rely on as a source of support and guidance to prepare for life after sport. No campus structure or programming matched the guidance they received from these mentors on campus.

International Student Services and Immigration Support. In addition to the lack of structure and guidance from campus resources about career readiness, ICAs also had to navigate several complex legal procedures. To pursue career aspirations post-sport in the U.S., ICAs, as a bare minimum, were expected to be educated about immigration procedures and stay within its parameters and restrictions. Keeping this in mind, ISS is an essential entity in an ICA's transition

journey as it supports IS well-being and programming, IS career preparation as it pertains to education about visa and immigration requirements as well as knowing employee and employer rights in the U.S. In this chapter, I only discuss the education and career readiness programmatic efforts or lack thereof experienced by participants in the study.

Majority of the participants knew about ISS since it was the first point of contact upon admission into the institution. This office sent ICAs their I-20 forms, a legal document to officially reside and study as an IS in the U.S., which started their journeys to navigate U.S. visa and immigration processes. While many schools had an ISS office, some only had a two-person department to support all ISs on campus. Many ICAs shared that their campus ISS had several social events but provided little to no resources or workshops to educate ICAs about potential post-college legal and work visa complexities.

A significant knowledge gap was identified among participants regarding various aspects of U.S. work authorization and tax regulations. This included limited understanding of topics such as the SSN application process, Optional Practical Training (OPT) eligibility, Curricular Practical Training (CPT) opportunities, work visa sponsorship, and the impact of STEM degrees on OPT extensions. The complexity of U.S. work authorization, tax regulations, and immigration guidelines is complex and confusing. They posed additional challenges for ICAs. In fact, only a few ICAs indicated their school's ISS office was involved in their college experience beyond just signing travel-related I-20s and providing minimal coursework to complete CPT and OPT paperwork. Most, throughout the entire course of their athletic and academic career, went without ever attending a single ISS session and were never informed about the work visa regulations and guidelines.

John was one such individual who got no support whatsoever and realized how the ISS office at her institution with an elite athletic program, had no educational programming to inform ICAs about the different immigration pathways and existing IS workforce opportunities. Shockingly, this led to John only finding out in May of her senior year that staying back in the U.S. on a work visa, OPT, was an option. Even after finding this out, she received no support on how to file for OPT. She had to believe in herself and her research skills to figure it all out individually. She said "there was no resource. I had to do a Google search. That was the only resource. And I use Google all the time…So, I would say Google was like my best friend and support." Further, she added,

> There are zero effort from the school. That's why I'm saying like there should be like some check-in place where they like literary force you, they go through the checklist of like or names of every student, like to tell students about the international student services and how to use them. Because, yeah, I had no idea about them.

Nim echoed similar sentiments as John and pointed out,

> I did at one point potentially start looking for my OPT and what that would have encompassed. But again, it's very different when you get sent a bunch of paperwork online saying, "hey, you need to complete this and then pay $400-$500 or whatever it was for your OPT." Or it's very different when you have someone sitting down with you to tell you about it to actually help you.

She felt ISS just prepared a Canvas course to complete their responsibility but did not provide support on how to file this critical, and potentially life-changing, piece of paperwork. Kate also

stated she was often frustrated with the lack of help she received from ISS staff. She articulated her discussion with the ISS officer,

> I was like "can you (ISS officer) just answer my simple question? Like do you have any like information about how to transfer from like F1 [student visa] to OPT to H1B [work visa]?" The thing they say in the office is like go talk to immigration lawyers. I don't fucking want to talk to an immigration attorney. I just wanted to be able to get an answer to these questions because it's a transitional question. I'm not like asking to tell me about like, how like, can I file for a green card after like forever…but like I'm transitioning from a student to a professional, why wouldn't they answer those questions?

Interactions like these annoyed Kate. ISS offices' expectation of ICAs to seek external legal counsel instead of being a support system themselves, an in-house office whose purpose should be exactly that—to support the IS experience, educate them about visa and immigration restrictions during school and beyond (until the end of OPT), and advocate for and on behalf of this population was a significant hurdle. Such expectations also put pressure on ICAs to seek extra funding, which many did not have due to their tight financial conditions in the final phase of their intercollegiate athletic careers. The perceived expectation from ISS that ICAs can and should handle complex visa and immigration matters independently created additional stress for ICAs during an already challenging time. In such cases, participants felt helpless, and confused, and often questioned their decision to come to the U.S.

While most had negative experiences, a few of the participants did receive some support from their ISS. Those who were informed about the different immigration avenues and work permit options through their ISS office were more aware of the visa and immigration system.

They knew the challenges that they could stumble upon as they pursued career aspirations in the U.S. However, a few still expressed their disappointment since no solutions or resources provided by ISS to navigate and overcome the potential challenges. For example, Maria, a white women's swimmer from Great Britain, elaborated,

> International services come and talk to student-athletes, and that happens probably once a year, but it's always about taxes and maintaining status, not about different work options related to what's next and how tough it can be. So maybe if international services were to come in and say like, "hey, if you go home, great, if you pursue a career in America, here are your options and all things you should consider." I think that would be cool…I think a lot of people struggle with just one day you're a student-athlete and the next day you're not and what to do then with being on your own.

She also added that ISS and athletic departments should both play a role in this life after sport navigation process since managing athletes' schedules and planning ICA-specific programming around that cannot only be ISS's responsibility. Peter, a Spanish men's tennis player, echoed Maria's sentiments:

> The international team did help me a lot with immigration and the visa and everything, but they didn't condition the stuff that I was going to get into. But I did feel that I had a really good team behind me from my school, supporting me with all the paperwork and guidance. But when it comes to helping find you a job or networking or organizing events or things like that, I thought it was quite poor from ISS.

These findings display how ICAs are expecting more intentional ICA-specific programmatic efforts from ISS. They are exhausted from witnessing officers signing off on I-20s and hosting a global potluck and believe more meaningful and substantial programming needs to take place for ICAs to experience smooth transitions into the U.S. workforce.

Lastly, more than half of the participants were never educated about filing taxes, building credit history, and its impact on their life beyond college in the U.S.—critical components of experiencing adult life in this country. Most of them never filed taxes because they were unaware and were never informed. One of the participants, Michelle, shared her experience about the lack of individualized messaging and education she received about taxes in America. Her concern echoed disappointment regarding staff on campus treating all ICAs the same and not catering to their national identity. As a Canadian getting a higher education degree, her country reimbursed her for her education payments like tuition and fees. It was because of an education pact shared between the U.S. and Canada. However, if not for her parents, she would have never known. She stated suggestions she would like for ISS to follow:

> I think more resources around like tax, based on country, like just all the things that you have to do, what things are going to look like for you when you're done, and when you do have to go, home paying taxes in your home country maybe. I mean, the good thing for me was that my parents told me and that I actually got a ton of money back on my taxes in Canada because of the documents from my American university… if not for them, I wouldn't know and I actually would not get money back from the Canadian government.

Her story demonstrated how numerous differences can exist not only in tax-related matters but also in visa and work-related immigration requirements for ICAs based on their country of

origin. ISS officers should be educated about the same and should also inform CA support services staff and work in partnership, as this can be extremely helpful in the transition out of sport process.

Division I Athletics Departments

While athletic departments often shield CAs from campus life, limiting their exposure and resources, one should expect them to compensate by offering robust career readiness programs within their spaces. However, like findings related to the lack of campus-wide ICA career readiness and support services, even athletic departments failed to provide post-athletic career support, mentorship, and guidance. Instead, they chose to maintain the restrictive 'athletic bubble' and intense athletic demands.

With the priority remaining on athletics, academic advisors and other athletics department staff were tasked to ensure ICAs always remain academically eligible, and participant experiences reinforced the focus on that task. They expressed disappointment in how no structure or system encouraged them to go above and beyond to pursue professional development opportunities. Instead, doing the bare minimum and getting passing grades in the classroom was their core purpose. According to several participants, athletic department support staff, especially academic advisors, rarely focused on ICA career preparation and readiness. Michelle shared

> They [athletic department academic staff] were more focused on just like making sure your grades were good and that you were like eligible rather than kind of like the focus of what you're going to do after. So, it was more like in the present are you doing okay in school? Are you getting good grades? Are you showing up to class? Are you checking all these boxes?

She further added:

> Even our coaches always like generally supported us in wanting us to do well but I don't think there was never like a sit-down conversation. Like what are your plans after this? Like what are you thinking?... and there was never anything from the athletic department overall in my opinion that was like supporting my career ambitions. They just did that show they cared but it was all talk.

Similarly, all other participants shared similar thoughts about various athletic department staff like academic advisors, mentors, and coaches only worrying about their eligibility. Thus, participants felt like anyone in athletics only cared about their ability to compete and win championships instead of truly caring for their holistic experience in college and beyond.

This lack of care from athletic department support staff, especially from academic advisors and career development specialists, was widespread amongst various other aspects of their lives. Many participants shared that none of the support staff members even cared to ask about what they wanted to do after graduation and whether they wanted to stay in the U.S. or return home. Sam shared "there was no programming, not even a resume building there was literally nothing." Romario expressed similar sentiments with extreme surety when I asked him if his athletics department supported his transition-out endeavors. He said "No. The athletic department, they don't care about your transition out. They don't care at all. They want you to stay eligible and run. That's all." Further, he shared how, as he got closer to graduation, the career development specialist in the athletics department did not even ask about what his plans were post-graduation if he found a job, and how they could potentially help him along the way. This left Romario disappointed, as in his eyes, it showed the lack of interest and willingness to support and guide this athletic department's staff had towards him and many others in similar

positions. His experience attests to how ICAs are treated merely as sources of athletic labor at DI institutions. While recruited with great passion and promised a holistic experience, the reality fails to meet the magical picture painted by these coaches. ICAs felt like they didn't know what to do closer to graduation because nobody cared to find out for them or guide them about what to do next. John also had a similar experience to share regarding the lack of support she received even after putting in the effort to educate herself by doing most of the research and homework:

> anytime I had those questions about how to navigate a certain application or something for my job, she's [career development specialist in athletics] like, "I don't know how this works." And you know, which like blows my mind because I guess every single student-athlete that had been at my university before that was an international, none of them really ended up staying in the U.S. So, they were like not aware of this process at all. Like after you're done, like I, and most of the international students that I knew from university sort of just moved back home.

John expressed her concern regarding such exclusionary behavior and lack of competency of the career specialist and felt upset thinking about what would happen to those who come after her. Jack stated how he felt about his academic advisor who also had ties to CA development services but did not help prepare him for a life after sport. While describing the nature of their interactions, he stated "there's not much discussion of 'what's after this?" Instead, Jack's advisor treated the athletes like cogs in a machine who come and go as a part of her job. He elaborated "after your last game, you become a regular student… you're basically done, and you get thrown away. They don't care what you do or where you go."

This lack of willingness to learn about the unique demographics of ICAs, their plans, goals, and ambitions by those who closely work with this population was a sad reality. It showed

in the career readiness programming and professional development initiatives, or lack thereof, hosted by athletic departments. Almost all participants expressed frustration with the lack of initiative by athletic departments to offer career readiness programs specifically tailored for ICAs. These departments typically conducted only one resume-building or LinkedIn profile building workshop per semester, but these sessions were not designed to cater to the needs of ICAs. Instead, ICAs were left to navigate their career paths. Azlan, someone who strongly cared about her career aspirations, mentioned how career development staff members did not even care to learn about ICAs, their goals, and how to support them. She communicated,

> No one [senior leadership] tells them [academic and career development support staff] anything. So, they just didn't take the effort to learn about it. They just, they don't care...they think if you're international, you will just figure it out on your own. They think, if you were international and you want to be here that bad in America, you can figure it out yourself.

She followed up by saying "And, sadly we do figure it out, we do, we don't complain, and we say, 'haan theek hai' [yes, it's alright], and we just do it since we are kind of left on our own." Thus, showing how those in athletic departments take advantage of these highly skilled athletes but do not take any initiative on their end to support this population and prepare them for what's next—leaving them unprepared for the workforce. John's athletic department also hosted some career readiness sessions which covered the basics like creating a resume, cover letter, and how to use them to apply for jobs in the U.S. She shared her experience with career readiness-specific programming and mentioned,

> They did resume workshops…But this woman was American, so was the other lady who was the assistant career development person…they had no idea of the

> complexity that comes with being an international student staying in the U.S. and then transitioning to get a job. They don't understand how hard it is to obtain a job. So, I remember they would keep telling me to apply to this job or that job and I am like it doesn't work that way, I can't do that. And she actually had given me a contact of this one or two people that I reached out to and they're like, "No, we don't take international students" or "we don't sponsor them" or, you know, things like that in it. It was like, I don't think they understood what it takes for us to find a job nor did they want to find out.

Additionally, a few participants whose athletic departments did provide minimal educational programming about navigating college, all the sessions were catered toward DCAs. Cameron shared her disappointment in attending a professional development event by stating "the systems and everything set up to prepare athletes for work and after graduation were very much tailored around American athletes in resumes and things like that. I mean, just because the whole system is set up by and for them." Tom, amongst many others also had a similar experience and shared how attending a networking event to try and secure a job "was all geared towards mainly the American students and not me." Both would have preferred to get advice on how one can also apply for jobs internationally. However, none of the folks working in the athletic department were competent enough to support job readiness pathways outside the U.S. Lastly, Nicole shared that the event she attended to work on her resume and resources for job search was good "but it was just so catered for Americans that it was a waste of time for me." Nicole's experience amongst many others displayed how athletic departments and institutions highly recruit this immigrant population but by no means do justice in preparing them with the skills and tools needed to be successful in the U.S., their home country, or elsewhere. This 'one size fits all'

approach used by HEIs and their departments leaves ICAs uneducated and unprepared to be independent successful adults in the workforce.

In addition to leaving ICAs unprepared for their life after sport due to the in-house programming or lack thereof offered by athletic departments, they also put little to no effort into hosting professional development initiatives that were inclusive of and beneficial to ICAs. More than half of the ICAs shared that their athletic departments hosted an annual career fair or networking event for their CAs. While these events were catered for *all* CAs to network with potential employers and explore job opportunities, ICAs rarely found these events beneficial. They felt a disconnect when speaking with employers. Not a single ICA in this study met an employer who was willing to sponsor a work visa at these campus events. None of them received a job after participating in at least one or more career fairs. Michelle shared her disappointment by stating,

> I don't remember being aware of them sponsoring anyone. They did have career fairs that I remember going to with some of my teammates…but there was definitely no talk of sponsoring or anything like that.

Bob also had a similar exclusionary experience and stated

> I mean they never got someone who sponsors for international students. As I said, they did get employers from different companies that again…we did not see anybody that would say, hey, we would sponsor your visa, for the future.

This lack of attention towards ICA work requirements by institutional staff members organizing the career fairs and the lack of willingness to engage in work visa sponsorship from employers was a common theme at some point in the job search journey of many participants. These were alarming experiences for ICAs as many also faced discrimination based on their immigrant

identities and failed to benefit from these networking opportunities, year after year. Chief expressed

> We're in this event, the people that we are interacting with, they don't know anything about the struggles that international students have to go through, and that was one of the things that at that time I was trying to push here on campus so that they can actually have a networking event specifically for international student-athletes, to bring the employers that are more likely to sponsor the work visas for international students and it never happened.

A few athletics departments also hosted athlete-only career fairs. These events were much smaller in scale and had fewer employers. None of the employers at these fairs sponsored ICA work visas. Many participants shared how these fairs felt as if they were just meant to tick a box off the athletic department's programming checklist. They were not intentional about catering to ICAs' unique employment-specific needs.

Participants shared how the overall career readiness programming efforts and holistic professional development initiatives felt performative. This left them feeling underprepared and unsure about steps moving forward post-athletic careers. For example, Nim shared the following about her advisor:

> She was good, but again, she didn't really advise me as to what could be next for me. I don't know if that was because she knew that I was from Australia or there just wasn't that connect from her. But yeah, in terms of what was offered to me afterward was just very slim, unfortunately.

Nim expressed disappointment at her advisor's failure to provide her options going forward. The advisor did not inform her about the possibility of continuing her education towards a graduate

degree while maintaining her scholarship status, nor did they guide her on how to take advantage of professional development opportunities that could improve her chances in the job market. Additionally, they did not advise her on how to effectively utilize her academic qualifications to secure financially rewarding and fulfilling job opportunities. Nim's mention of Australia in her comment reflected her belief that her academic advisor failed to recognize or value her professional aspirations, assuming she would return to her native country after graduation. Furthermore, the advisor appeared oblivious to the specific requirements and procedures needed for career readiness in Australia. This was not unique to Nim. Many other participants, despite being recruited by choice, reported similar disregard for their unique identities.

John also shared her frustration with her academic advisor and how she felt they used and betrayed her at the cost of her athletic ability. She stated,

> I mean, none of the academic advisors or any of that have an idea about H1B or the visa sponsorship or any of that like which is so frustrating because here you are like, you know, it's, it's almost feels like a business like they use you for four years, you know, kind of that. And then after it's like done like you're off on your own.

Most of these participants strongly felt that they were exploited and/or underserved by their institutions, especially as they sought guidance during this stage of their journey and received little to none after pouring hearts, souls, and bodies into the institution's athletic programs.

In retrospect, a few of the participants shared how they wished their academic advisors and career development professionals sat them down and provided them exposure to the different majors and how it impacts career trajectories in the U.S. They also wished they were told about

what it means to pursue a STEM vs non-STEM degree and the implications that can have on career aspirations and salary ranges in the future. For example, John explained

> I'm telling you if I had better guidance and they were like, you know, you can pursue this if you really want to. I would have done a STEM degree. My life would be so much better after graduation.

With this, John was referencing how she could have obtained a three-year OPT instead of a one-year OPT. This would provide more options for workforce opportunities and allow her to continue working after the first year instead of going back to school to pursue a master's degree to earn another post-completion OPT. Additionally, she expressed how STEM-related fields earn higher salaries versus non-STEM and how that would be extremely helpful at this point in her career as well. Finally, since many ISS offices didn't inform participants about CPT, several participants expressed that their academic advisors could have played a crucial role here. Had advisors been aware of and shared information about degree-related CPT options for ICAs, many students would have sought internships. This valuable experience would have provided both financial benefits and strengthened their resumes with work experience, a gap many faced due to the lack of information. The absence of internship opportunities, stemming from this knowledge gap, significantly impacted participants' job searches in the future. Some, ultimately lacking the desired experience to acquire jobs, even faced the difficult decision of returning home.

While maintaining academic eligibility is crucial for participation in athletics, some participants expressed athletic departments prioritized minimum GPA requirements over a broader focus on holistic academic experiences and career development. Chief's comments exemplify this sentiment. He stated, "'they're using us for labor basically. So, it's like once we

are gone, they can't benefit from us, so they don't want anything to do with it." This perspective suggested that some ICAs felt their value was primarily tied to their athletic performance. However, Chief also offered a hopeful perspective on the potential for a more mutually beneficial relationship. He argued

> they're forgetting that by helping the people [ICAs] that can benefit from this programming [career readiness], it can also help them too in the long run… as long as school think this is not just about the business but it's also about the ICAs development as well, will go far.

In other words, he believes that investing in ICAs' holistic development can benefit both the student-athlete and the institution. He further elaborated,

> I want to be able to help my school as a person too if you can help me with that [getting ready for life after college]. If I am successful, I can come back and support my team and school in the future.

Chief envisioned a future where ICAs and institutions have a strong, lasting connection built on mutual support.

Role of Personal Support Systems

Across the study, participants consistently emphasized the crucial role their social networks played in navigating life in the U.S., especially during their career readiness and critical transition out of sport phase. International friends, teammates, former ICAs, and even family members across the globe became their trusted advisors and support systems during this time and helped navigate the job search maze. Chief's experience perfectly illustrated this reliance on social capital:

> I have friends from all over, different schools, and universities...the athletic department doesn't care once you transition out, so we just talked about visas and paperwork and figured things out together.

This reliance on networks extended beyond emotional support. Participants actively sought and received crucial guidance on job searches, visa sponsorships, and even navigating the complexities of immigration paperwork. Chief's friend, another former ICA, offered him invaluable advice on building credit, a vital step for post-graduation life in the U.S.:

> hey man, here's a free advice from a brother to another brother. Make sure you start building your credit score now…maybe later you need to get a loan, you can do…maybe you can apply for OPT or whatever and find ways to pay back whatever the loan that you have.

This was helpful information for Chief as it allowed him to get a car based on his score to then use for work responsibilities upon graduation.

Other participants had their own connections and support systems they relied on during this tough transition phase. John's story exemplifies this reliance on social capital. When online resources to navigate work authorization processes in the U.S. failed her, she turned to trusted friends from India. She stated, "they helped me out a lot with navigating the U.S. workforce." She also recalled,

> She [Indian friend] was the one that told me everything…like how to go through the H1B visa… what happens in the lottery and all those things. She gave me all the scrambles of what it could be. She helped me a little bit with my, "oh hey how can I address this?" type of questions in interviews. "Is my dress okay for the interview?" She also overviewed my resume from time to time.

These friends stepped in where official channels often failed, providing the guidance and support that should have been readily available through athletic departments and ISS. They became confidantes, sounding boards, and sometimes even cheerleaders, propelling their fellow ICAs forward during this challenging transition. In addition to friends, current and former teammates also played a role in helping their current and junior teammates. Many ICAs who ended up staying back in the U.S. for work had reached out to their predecessors from across HEIs in the U.S. as well as alumni. Sarah expressed how she felt very supported by her teammates, especially those who had already navigated the OPT paperwork channels. They also helped her get connected with the institution's athletic department alumni website to connect with former ICAs to learn about their careers and ask for help when needed. She mentioned, "I would have never known about this resource if it was not for my seniors." Tom, Adin, Victoria, a Venezuelan women's tennis player, and several others also echoed similar experiences about following their teammates' or predecessors' footsteps in learning about the most critical component of their life in the U.S., how to reside in the U.S. through legal channels and pursue work opportunities.

Lastly, one of the biggest support systems for the intrinsically motivated participants in the study was themselves. Regardless of the scarcity of career readiness and immigration navigation resources available to them, they found a way to look for opportunities to work and live in America. They navigated all the challenges along the way with a positive mindset. John found out she could work in America the month before graduation; however, she used her so-called "best friend Google" to find a job within 60 days, reached out to her friends, and found a way to apply for the OPT and start working. At the time of our interview, she still resided in the

U.S. and led a successful career as an investment banker. Bob shared similar experiences of self-teaching himself, he expressed his career readiness process by sharing:

> I was self-taught a lot of things…Nobody really came up to us and said, "okay, you have to go here," "you have to do these," "you have to do that." So, a lot of things, you just find out for yourself. You ask your, other teammates, you ask your friends that you meet in classes, like, "what are you doing?" "How did you do this?" "How have you been doing that?" And eventually it works out.

Maria expressed

> I would love to give the university credit for it. But I feel like it was self-driven. I feel like most of my professional habits come from my close support, network of my parents, my coach, my boyfriend, and his family. I would say it was mainly self-driven.

These individuals just helped themselves and found ways to learn by their means and those available around them. Another participant, Shanky, started to engage in career readiness practices from very early on in his academic and athletic career. He mentioned,

> I quickly realized I needed mentorship to navigate life here since it was so different. I always wanted to be successful, so I reached out to a professor who informed me about how to get into the racket sports industry. That's what I wanted to do. From him, I learnt about a lot of certifications and conferences, and he recommended I start going to them from my sophomore year…I have maintained relationships with people I met even today… that has led to having this job now.

His aspirations to pursue a professional career in the U.S. workforce from a very early age supported by his determination show the amount of tenacity and effort it takes for an IS to be successful in the U.S. workforce. Lastly, Bob, a Spanish tennis player shared that he was self-motivated, but due to his lack of fluency in English and lack of understanding of documents needed to apply for jobs in the U.S., he had to seek external support to learn from a professional who provided resume workshops, cover letter workshops, and LinkedIn workshops for students. While this was something Bob was able to do, others, many of whom had extremely low savings and insufficient financial capital did not have the privilege to engage with these opportunities. Therefore, they primarily blamed athletic departments for their lack of preparedness and understanding of this system.

Overall, ICAs' individual support networks, like friends, teammates, country mates, faculty members, mentors, and family members, especially those with cultural capital about the system here in the U.S. were most helpful in guiding ICAs through the career readiness and transition phase even though not everyone was not able to provide a roadmap or engage in consistent programming efforts. Having folks who were just a call, text, or meeting appointment away when seeking guidance and mentorship to navigate complex U.S. workforce-related intricacies saved ICAs some time, effort, and unwarranted stress.

Focus on Athletic Performance Over Academic and Professional Growth

ICAs perceived coming to the U.S. as an opportunity to play elite-level sports and get a world-class education. They were right about one of those claims. All participants shared that their experience as CAs in the U.S. higher education environment was highly focused on the athletics component of the experience. Their life revolved around training and competition schedules. This knowingly, or unknowingly, forced ICAs to also prioritize athletics over their academic and professional development journey.

> Thinking about what's next was pretty low down on the list in that department. But yeah, I just feel like my brain wasn't even thinking in that direction, but I should have been more focused on the academic side of things,

shared Michelle when asked about how her life as a college athlete influenced her preparation to transition out of sport. Looking back upon her experience, she added,

> I was so focused on gymnastics… I wasn't involved in the things that I should have been if I was serious about journalism like I didn't join the school paper like I wasn't really doing anything like that to help myself. So, I feel like I wasn't prepared when I left, and I really had no choice because my schedule was so busy.

Nim also expressed how navigating these murky waters is "especially challenging for student-athletes, where they've been constantly doing tennis or they're doing their sport and studying, sport and study." She mentioned, "we have no time to go out to campus events or even do any work experience. Also, our visa doesn't allow it either."

In addition to discussing the athletic demands placed on these CAs, bringing the visa challenges into the conversation added another layer of complexity to their experience as ICAs. She expressed the need for athletic departments to reconsider how they overwork athletes and for college campuses to consider providing on-campus part-time work and CPT opportunities related to majors for ISs. Kate had similar sentiments and stated

> Most of the time I had night classes and I couldn't attend them [career readiness events]. It wasn't just like they had stuff for us [ICAs] only anyways but just it was hard for me to attend most of the time since training took up most of the day.

Thus, these participants and many more expressed how they were funneled into the athletics-first bubble created by coaches and athletic department staff.

John described a situation where balancing academic and athletic commitments presented challenges. She expressed a desire to pursue an internship alongside her studies, but noted that the time demands associated with athletic participation and expectations set forth by coaches combined with the specific visa regulations applicable to ICAs made this goal difficult to achieve:

> Our culture, it was pretty strict because she [head coach] had told us that we want to be top 20. So, it took a lot of practice. It took so many hours and, you know, I was so bought into that vision itself so that way I wouldn't want to miss practice because then I was playing number one and I did not want to lose my matches because I didn't put enough practice. And so, I mean, it's so tough to do it. So tough. Our summer term we had to spend one month training, because we agree like one month-long term is needed for practice. So, for two months in the summer, you could be absent. For one, you had to be there usually the one right before fall season. So, you know, then for doing an internship you have to find an internship that's only like two months long. That's not common and we were like a quarter system school, so we didn't even end till June 15th…So there were like a lot of things that just weren't lined up. Like it's so tough being a student-athlete right, I would say like a high level or like a level Power-5 where they care so much about your results…But for us like on top of all that it is like you have to get your immigration paperwork approved and so much visa stuff, you know, it's hard.

John's story demonstrates how ICAs experience all the challenges faced by the DCAs and more because of their national origin/s and visa status in this country. Navigating both as a young college student, without much support and structure, is incredibly challenging.

In this environment, those who still pursued internship opportunities to provide themselves a better chance and be better prepared to get a job upon graduation had to go above and beyond to make it happen. Some had to go against their coaching staff's desires. Jay explained,

> Internship-wise, I had to make an executive decision with the Rams and told my coach and was just like, hey, this is what I'm doing, like this is good for my career, and it was good. I'm glad I did it, but yeah, it wasn't something that was like pushed or encouraged instead, it was like, I don't know how to tell my coach this sort of situation which sucked but I did it anyway.

Jay decided to put his career aspirations first by the end of his junior year since he knew it was time to think about the next chapter of his life. Some others had to prioritize their potential future professional success over their current mental health state, which was already taking a toll due to their time commitments as college athletes. For example, Chief expressed

> So, for one season, I had to devote about 30 hours a week of running. I still have classes. I have to go to class, I have to go do my unpaid internship, I have to do at least whatever hours that I needed to do. So, it has affected me to a point whereby I just felt like I was just all over the place. I just had a lot to do and then not even have time for myself to take care of my myself. So that's how it affected me but you know it's paying off now.

Even after going through this at a personal level, Chief shared it was extremely hard to make it all happen in the first place:

> My coach at that time, he didn't look like he was more willing to work around my academic schedule and my internship schedule. And my supervisor for my internship, they were able to work together with me because obviously it's unpaid internship, so they kind of make it because I'm a student-athlete, they just make that exception.

Having a coach who only prioritized athletics and did not support CAs holistically was problematic in many ways, especially for ICAs who knew they wanted to pursue careers outside of professional sports from the start of their intercollegiate athletic careers. Strict practice schedules and no flexibility to work around one's academic demands hurt many ICA careers as they would navigate pursuing a different path of study. From most of the participants' experiences, coaches either negatively impacted ICA career readiness due to their entire focus being on athletics and winning, or they were performative with their actions. Megha shared how her coach was merely performative and asked "what do you think is going to happen in five years?... where you think you'll be?" However, the coach never asked her questions like "what we can do to help you get to where you want to be in five years?" Those questions begin to steer ICAs toward support and resources. She expressed her disappointment in how coaches have one of these meetings at the start of the year "then never talk about it again and never take any action on it." Michelle also shared how coaches wanted the best for them but never had a sit-down conversation about the next steps. She stated, "any meetings I had with my coaches were always athletic based."

While most coaches had negative or little to no impact on helping ICAs with their career preparation motivations and journeys, a couple of coaches did connect the participants with their professional network to help with mentorship and internship/job opportunities. Participants shared a few relatively positive experiences with these coaches— while they did not influence the career prep, they at least supported them when these participants were motivated and chose to pursue career readiness initiatives like internships, and professional development programming events, and wanted recommendation letters for support. Azlan shared,

> My coach was helpful, but my coach was more of like a support system, she never encouraged me to look for things. It was more like, I looked for things and just ask for approval if I could go after them and she was okay with it... No, I mean, she's like, the minority amongst coaches, when it comes to that…I can always call her, and she'll tell me how to navigate. Like, I've had, so much help from her, in a professional way, which is, she writes my letters of recommendations, and all this stuff, so professionally, she's awesome.

Further, she added,

> Our coach always worked with us, if we want it to go somewhere and do something for an internship or work, or something that would advance our career goals, she was always down for it… she's extremely involved in our professional growth, in general, and it was always very motivating that, you've got this. Like, If I had an interview scheduled during practice, she worked with me, to practice either later or not practice that day, and like, it was not a big deal. She was she was extremely, shockingly good, about that stuff. Because, I also think, she knew that tennis is not our entire life and eventually we'll need to move on.

Like Azlan, Jack had a similar experience with his football coach, which was surprising as his former coaches before transferring did not invest in athlete development. The previous coach made him practice more than 40 hours a week in addition to watching films. The new coach, Jack mentioned,

> He agreed that if... he knew I was more focused in somewhat a life after football that if I wanted to miss a summer workout to intern, which I did, that there was no issue for that. So that was a big calling.

This coach also made the entire team dress up in suits prior to football games and provided space to host tie-tying and etiquette workshops within their football schedules to help the men prepare for what is commonly assumed as the professional workforce dress code. These participants shared immense gratitude towards their coaches. Today, they are the ones who continue to be employed, satisfied, and successful, as per their definitions, in the workforce. Thus, those few who were given even the smallest opportunities to prioritize career preparation and thinking about their future over athletics ended up navigating the next phase of their life with better planning and structures in place.

Summary

Overall, ICAs lacked cultural capital, knowledge, and awareness about the system and structures, about navigating life in the U.S. and preparing for the workforce. They experienced high athletic demands and were left with little time to focus on their career beyond sport, especially for those looking to enter the workforce in the U.S. or elsewhere. During their time at U.S. HEIs, they also received little to no support and guidance in their career readiness journeys from various stakeholders like the NCAA, U.S. HEIs, athletic departments, and its support staff members like academic advisors, college athlete development specialists, student affairs professionals, ISS officers, and coaches. This left most ICAs unprepared for life after sport. In such tough times,

ICAs often relied on personal and professional support networks to navigate the complex time of their life in ending a competitive athletic career while also preparing for what's next. To further discuss the next steps of this transition out of sport journey, in Chapter Five, I delve deeper into participant experiences as they navigated interacting with employers and the U.S. workforce—a daunting task for any recent graduate, especially those who are immigrants navigating visa and immigration complexities, in addition, being unaware and underprepared for what to expect next.

Chapter 5: Findings Part II – International College Athlete Job Search and Transition Out of Sport Journey

The job search process was a critical, uncertain, and anxiety-provoking time for participants of this study. As international college athletes (ICAs) prepared to hang up their jerseys and step into the workforce, their transition was fraught with the complexities of finding a job. In this chapter, the focus is primarily on those who remained in the U.S., though insights from those who left by choice or were forced to leave are also included. Participants expressed the prominent factors impacting their job search and transition. Personal and financial challenges were prevalent, but the role of strong social and professional networks emerged as a crucial element in securing employment. While finding employment was a hurdle, even greater challenges awaited some ICAs. This chapter also explores the exclusionary and anti-immigrant experiences they faced from employers. These encounters not only impacted their job search but also affected their overall well-being and decisions about their future in the U.S. Furthermore, a lack of awareness about different academic majors and how their degrees translated to the workforce sometimes hindered their long-term career plans. During such a challenging phase in their life, certain post-athletics transition challenges related to physical and mental health were also woven into the conversation. In essence, navigating the job market was not simply a challenge for these participants; it was and continues to be a complex ecosystem demanding resilience, resourcefulness, and a healthy dose of adaptability.

Financial and Personal Challenges

During the job search stage, lack of financial security was a common thread among participant experiences. Other than a few participants who were able to intentionally build some savings throughout their intercollegiate careers or had financial support from family, most struggled financially while job searching during their F-1 specific unemployment grace period

(90 days) in the U.S. This is the total number of days an ICA can stay in the U.S. after receiving an Optional Practical Training (OPT) without being employed. After an accumulation of 90 unemployment days post-graduation, one becomes ineligible to stay and work in the U.S. This forces all international students, including ICAs, to return home. Jack expressed his disappointment with this rule and said "an international athlete wanting to stay here, not having the same opportunity as others… and you only have 90 days to find a job or get kicked out. That whole thing is so stressful." Additionally, the costs associated with immigration paperwork, like applying for the OPT upon graduation, were also unknown to most participants upon graduation. Due to a lack of knowledge about this cost, some participants had no personal savings to apply for this and others were surprised about the cost and had to figure out ways to make ends meet. Megha shared, "I had to pay like 600 [dollars] or something, it was ridiculous." She further added that this was not the only cost she had to bear. While waiting for several months to receive the OPT, when she finally received something in the mail, it was a rejection letter. She expressed, "I found out that the ISS office messed up my application…I had a terrible experience working with them…they put the wrong date… and guess what, I had to spend even more money from my pocket" before sharing a brief story:

> She [ISS officer] put a wrong date from her end and I had to pay, like $600, again for the OPT. I was like, what the fuck is this? And they were just like, "yeah, sorry, we can't do anything." I mean, they knew it was their mistake. But then, it was like, "you need to pay $600 again." It wasn't like I was swimming in money at that time. So to have to pay that again, was quite rude. I mean, it was a month's rent.

Facing a stressful and compressed job search window after graduation, in addition to financial insecurity, some participants resorted to informal work to make ends meet and afford work authorization applications like OPT. This often involved cash-based arrangements, such as coaching sports lessons or working at nightclubs and bars. When asked about this period, Jay, concerned about confidentiality, first inquired, "How on record am I?" Upon reassurance, he revealed the hidden struggles of his journey:

> I was bar backing or bartending because theoretically I still didn't break any rules, I just took tips at the end of the night and so I didn't get paid hourly or anything like that, so I was just making money to survive.

In a similar situation, Tom's job start date in California was delayed due to an OPT approval delay. Unable to work officially, he turned to brief tennis coaching gigs paid through cash and Venmo, as he explained:

> I did some tennis coaching for an academy, just until the job started... this was that brief period when I had just moved to [city and employer name removed], where, yeah, there was that insecurity.

Reflecting on the overall challenges, Kate stated,

> Like if someone tells you like it was pretty smooth for them, they are telling a lie. You have to like buy furniture because I only stayed in dorms before this. I had to find a place to stay and I had to start thinking about taxes and health insurance and all this stuff. So, it wasn't like the best transition because there was so many unknown.

These experiences highlighted the additional financial pressures faced by ICAs even after securing employment. Unexpected expenses associated with paperwork, insurance, and

settling into a new life significantly strained their budgets during the job search and early career, a time when finances were already tight. Many participants emphasized the value of pre-graduation education from athletic departments on these realities. Having a clearer picture of what lies ahead during the career readiness phase would have better-prepared ICAs for the financial demands of transitioning to the workforce.

In addition to working illegally (as per F-1 visa)/cash-only, to navigate this transition out of sport and into the job search phase, participants found ways to reduce costs and live with as minimal expenditures as possible. A couple of participants stayed with their athletic program's donors, teammates, and friends to cut down their housing and food-related expenses during this time. Jack shared the help he received from friends as he went through a difficult time in his transition:

> There was a period there, I started getting kind of anti-America because of how difficult it was getting. I was really pissed off at how hard it was given that through that time I wasn't allowed to work so again, I was figuring it out and I was living on my buddy's couch as a 26-year-old with a master's degree from a top 25 law school, I felt like I was like anywhere in the world, this should be easy and I'm here living like a bum because I'm foreign, that's what it came down to so that was really difficult, so the transition out of college has been difficult.

Megha ended up living with her teammate whose family happened to be big-time donors of the institution. She stated,

> Obviously, the lease at my apartment ended and I moved to my teammates' for two months…I stayed there for two months, and it was nice to sort of have those

people in the house. Thankfully, they talked some sense into me as it was a really hard time.

Financial difficulties continued to be a common trend for most participants, even those who returned to their home countries during the transition phase. For example, Nim, who returned to Australia and was able to stay with her mom, which helped financially to some extent, still had to go through a different application process to get financial support from the Australian government to manage all other aspects of her life. She also ended up giving tennis lessons on the side to make extra money until she was employed. She elaborated

> So, when I did come back from America, the first thing I did was enroll or register with Centrelink and just say, "Hey, I'm unemployed, I need a little bit of financial assistance until I get employed." And because everything was happening with Covid they were really generous at the beginning with how much they were giving…But that's why I kept looking for a full-time job because our summer months, so January through to May, really busy, tennis is really hot. I was probably able to make $3,000 within the span of like three-ish months. So, again, when you break that down, how much are you making per month? How much are you making per week? It's not a lot, but because I was able to just make a little bit more and save it, it was good. But then when it's winter in Australia it's a lot of rain and we don't have any indoor courts in Australia, so you can't play tennis and it gets dark at like 5:00, so your window of playing tennis is like two hours. So, then for the winter months, I was only making like $300-400 a month. Very little.

Other participants who went home, like Bob and Sam, had no money saved but had family businesses to lean back on for professional and financial support. Bob started to work for his dad's business and Sam started to work at her mom's hair salon. They also chose to stay with their families due to a lack of financial means upon ending their intercollegiate athletic careers. This was the only way to stay financially afloat despite earning a higher education degree from the U.S. Tom remarked, it was "kinda shocking." While financial insecurity continued to be a common trend for most participants who returned home, only one participant was in better shape financially. Cameron had saved money to make ends meet, as she knew the possibility of returning home was real, especially as she navigated the Covid-19 pandemic as she approached graduation. She was proactive in this process and predicted the potential of uncertain times. She also knew her parents could not support her financially upon returning home. She shared how she planned and saved for an uncertain post-athletics career:

> So, I was aware of the fact I was living off a stipend on my scholarship and that was going to run out. So, I tried my best to save and save and save so that when and if I did go back home, especially during COVID, I had some money to support myself until I found a job. I was moving back in with my parents, but like I couldn't expect to just live off them forever. That wasn't going to work. So, I did like support myself on my savings…I got a job in August, not long after the money ran out. So, it was timed pretty well.

Other than financial difficulties, participants also navigated other personal challenges during their transition out of sport and initial job search phase. Many shared mental and physical

health concerns, experiences with anti-immigrant discourse and federal policies, and post-athletic transition issues related to leaving the sport and losing a sense of identity. All of this was coupled with the arduous process of applying for jobs, experiencing rejections, and feeling low and unsuccessful, especially when being far away from home and family. John felt strongly about how this period was the toughest phase of her life. She stated,

> Hopefully, I don't have to go through anything like this ever again. If we have an employer that says, okay, once you've finished your masters, come work for us, then great. Otherwise, you go through that same thing again and again. It's so hard. It's hard and stretched. It becomes even harder because you have no family here…mental health status has really taken a hit… I remember like I had, you know, shut out people from my life because I was having such a hard time. I sort of just wanted to be alone and there's like, I guess yeah, that that transition was tough.

John's story is one of many that illustrates how this short period granted upon OPT approval, especially for those looking for jobs after graduation, has a serious impact on their lives. Ashley, a women's soccer player from Brazil, echoed similar sentiments and shared how this transition was hard on her self-identity, taking a toll on her mental health. She noted,

> It was extremely stressful because I was tied to my goal – it was always to stay here [in the U.S.]. Like I always wanted to stay in the States and as soon as that like my connection to the sport or to university was coming to an end, I was so lost, because like how am I going to do? So, like being an international student, you have the extra pressure of having to graduate with a job offer or having to

> graduate with something that would allow you to stay in the States. So, that transition for me was extremely stressful.

Megha also grappled with an identity crisis, adding,

> I was just so confused with what I should do with my life, and I would almost say like identity crisis, like, do I keep playing tennis? How do I let go of sports? What do I want to work with? I had no idea what I wanted to work with. I had no idea where I want it to live in the world, what I wanted to be, and how I could do it.

The lack of sport and structure was hard for many of the participants, especially as their lives often revolved around sports in this country and many did not think about life beyond athletics in the U.S. Maria had a hard time navigating life without college sports:

> No workout schedule is planned in my day—that was really challenging and something that I struggle with mentally because I feel guilty for not working out. I've spent the past five years working out five hours a day, Monday through Saturday and then it just stopped. It's just like for such a long time saying that I am a student-athlete with my identity and now I don't have that identity and I'm just trying to figure out what it is. That's been really hard with all the job and visa stuff.

Tom expressed,

> My whole idea was, yeah the studies were secondary in the beginning for me than to tennis. And that flipped in the last two years, but as we're not from the States, you don't really know where to start or... whether your future lies there. It was much more a bit of a rougher landscape to navigate.

This sudden end of competitive sport in a country where they consistently remained consumed within the athletic bubble was hard for many participants and led to some experiencing other issues like negative body image and eating disorders, which are also extremely common among the CA population.

In addition to identity and mental health issues, many participants discussed injury management issues and challenges with maintaining good health after a physically and emotionally challenging college athletics career. While that is not the focus of this dissertation's findings, one participant's experience with U.S. healthcare access and managing her health impacted her decision to not look for jobs anymore and return home. Megha recounted a distressing experience about her health issues and difficulties in finding jobs near her graduation date. This was coupled with feelings of loneliness and a lack of community as she looked forward to her future in the U.S. Her story highlights how college athletic departments and U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) exploit, underserve, and often paint a false image of athletic departments and college campuses as a "family" for this population. She shared

> Why should I stay in the US? Because all of my teammates are going to be scattered around the world. It's not like I'm going to have my team anymore. I'm not part of the team anymore. I'm not part of the university anymore either. I actually remember we had graduation on the 11th of May, I think. And at this time, I really had issues with getting massive, big UTIs and then getting bladder infections from UTIs…it was like the night between the 11th and the 12th, it just got so worse, and I just knew I had a bladder infection, and it will always be the same procedure, I just go to [university health center], I'd get my antibiotics and I'd be fine. And I went to [university health center] on the 12th, like, literally the

> day after we graduated and they're like, we cannot help you. Like, we don't want to see you. And I spoke to the doctor, I was like, I know what I have, I just need these antibiotics, just please, just let me pay for it. I don't, I don't care how much it costs. They were like, no, we can't help you, you also need to see a doctor, we can't just administer antibiotics. I was literally, I was shut out. It was like, from one day to the other, I was part of the community and the next day I was lost. I had no idea how to find a personal doctor. I had no idea how much it was going to cost because I know that health care bills are ridiculous in the U.S. And I literally was like, I don't know who to see, I don't know where to go. I don't know who to call, and I was so stressed out. I didn't want to ask the coaches, but I just knew that I needed these antibiotics and I ended up calling my teammate's mom, and they had a private doctor who just gave me antibiotics. And then again, that was just such a privileged thing to do. And if I hadn't had them, I honestly would have no idea what I would've done. Like, absolutely no idea. Yeah, they have a messed up medical system, especially for us internationals. So, it's like, no one talks to us, during our time as an athlete about these things, because I think athletic trainers take care of it and then, you know, we are kind of stranded a little bit. Yeah. From what you know, you have no insurance, no health care. No, nothing. It was crazy.

This experience, Megha mentioned was "traumatic". A system, one that the day before had told her "we [ICAs] were the brightly shining stars" of the university now refused to provide critical assistance when it was most needed by Megha. She described simultaneously feeling angry, upset, and frustrated. She didn't expect this from an institution's healthcare team after

experiencing the trauma of college sports. This realization led her to comprehend why her seniors had previously warned her about the commercial nature of college athletics in the U.S. They had told her, “do not be surprised if all you do is play tennis and don’t have a life.” Ultimately, this entire experience, in addition to Megha’s seniors’ voice repeatedly playing in her ears, became a major factor in her decision to return to Denmark, where “healthcare systems and educational institutions are more ethical, organized, and supportive.”

Lastly, almost all ICAs of color, especially those from countries in Asia, Africa, and South America had a greater concern to share —how their lives beyond athletics were at stake in the U.S. due to racist and anti-immigrant U.S. government leaders, especially Donald Trump [President of the U.S. when most ICAs in this study were navigating the U.S. job market]. Many shared sentiments of a stark awareness that they could be kicked out at any time and that they were simply sources of financial gain (those not on full scholarship) and athletic prowess (those on full scholarships). However, they wanted to find a way to stay in the U.S., to potentially make their perception of the “American Dream” come true, and to fight through the exclusionary and anti-immigrant environment so they could make a better life for themselves. On the other hand, only two participants in the study, who identified as white from Canada and New Zealand, openly discussed their opinions of former President Trump and his exclusionary immigration policies. They mentioned how the nationalist climate in the U.S. also negatively affected their mental health and caused distress in their lives. Jay elaborated,

> What really frustrated me was Trump's narrative towards us as immigrants. Again, I'm not naive of the fact that I'm a white male so I wasn't really in the ones discussed and others were, but when an H1B gets banned and that was my key to

> staying here and it gets banned just months before I need to apply for it, yeah, I'm stressing for that period.

Michelle was the other participant who discussed her disappointment with U.S. federal policies and Trump's behavior. She also questioned if staying in America during the pro-gun and pro-anti-abortion discourse was truly worth it as a woman wanting to get married and raise a family in the future—a lot to think through for one in their early twenties just finishing college. Expressing her disappointment, and explaining why she left the U.S., she said,

> Like just immigration stuff, guns, abortion, and the lack of health care. I mean, Canada is not perfect, obviously, but the major inequalities that exist here, and just like some of the very extreme viewpoints, are quite alarming….so, it was just one of the reasons I thought going back might suit me better.

This disparity in experiences underscores the complex decision-making faced by ICAs of color. Navigating a potentially hostile political climate added another layer of stress, especially for those with limited options outside the U.S. However, for ICAs with strong socioeconomic support or job opportunities back home, the "American Dream" held less allure compared to the anxieties of navigating an uncertain future in the US.

Overall, personal challenges, including impacts of political climate, and financial constraints were important factors in how participants navigated their job search phase. It was especially challenging for those with little to no social capital as they had to manage with less money and a lack of support systems.

Role of Social Capital in Navigating the Job Market

All participants emphasized the crucial role of social capital in navigating the job market. This meant having strong social, personal, and professional connections, especially while facing financial and personal challenges. Findings showed that participants who possessed networks of

friends, family, and/or professional connections within the U.S. workforce generally encountered a smoother journey compared to those who lacked such support systems. Participants who built connections with individuals willing to bridge the gap to other professionals found it easier to open doors and land opportunities. Similarly, those who participated in internships or volunteer work and maintained positive relationships with their supervisors often secured full-time positions after graduation. John highlighted this in her experience as someone lacking such networks:

> It's [finding internships and jobs] especially harder since no family members are in the U.S. My parents don't even know anyone here. So, it's not like I can ask for help from an uncle. Even he has no idea how this all works.

John's sarcastic remark about relying solely on internships further underscored the challenge. She went on to elaborate

> Hopefully, you did two summers at the same internship on CPT, did really well, got along with your supervisor, and then they'll offer you to come back as a full-time after your college is done, So yeah like just hopefully.

This highlighted the difficulty in obtaining ideal jobs when employers have extremely high expectations from individuals just graduating from college. It does not make the transition process any easier, especially as an international student who oftentimes neither possesses the social capital nor the cultural capital to navigate the U.S. job market as well as the complex visa application and approval process in this country.

None of the participants had direct family ties in the U.S. They did not know anyone other than a few distinct relatives if any, and fellow peers from their country who were playing college sports in other states across the country. Thus, all ICAs in this study

who had personal and professional connections in the U.S. built and acquired them while in college. Chief, for example, refused to rely solely on athletics to find job opportunities. He recognized his limitations, and stated, "I was top 10 in the world, and they just wanted me to run." He knew “they did not care about what I do after.” Instead, he capitalized on his relationships with affluent teammates and classmates at his private institution. He built bridges with their parents, many of whom were business owners. "I had to find my way to make those connections," he explained, "I asked for mentorship and guidance." These connections opened doors, with individuals offering to tap into their extensive networks and even connecting him with his current employer. Kate's story echoed similar sentiments as well. While an earlier internship provided her with a basic experience of the U.S. workforce, it was her consistent effort in maintaining that connection that proved invaluable. Upon graduation, she reached out to her former supervisor, which resulted in not just a warm reception, but an actual job offer. "I just had to apply for OPT instead of CPT," she shared regarding the initial paperwork hurdles, "But as soon as I had everything in order, even with Covid going on, things went smoothly." For Kate, the message was clear – internships are important, but it's the follow-through, nurturing those relationships over time, that paved the way for success. Both experiences highlighted a crucial point—for ICAs facing limited social capital, success in the job market often hinges on their ability to actively build networks and nurture connections.

Building these relationships and maintaining them over time was also key for many other participants as they continued to build their social capital. Sam returned to Bolivia, indicating she had zero hope of finding a job after graduation. She also had her mother’s salon business back home she could manage, so there was always a Plan B for her. More importantly, she did not

want to deal with the mental health issues she was experiencing post-sport by herself. She was tired of the rejections she received due to her international status in the U.S. job market. However, her former supervisor and now friend was always looking out for her. When the opportunity arose in her athletic department to work with college athlete development, something Sam always longed to do, she had an opportunity to return to the U.S. and she chose to do so.

Anna was in a similar situation upon returning to Chile. Despite returning home, she remained in touch with her professors and friends. One of the professors, her mentor, eventually found her an opportunity to work in the U.S., leading to her return to the U.S. to fulfill her dream of working as an athletic trainer. Even for Michelle, a participant who returned to Canada by choice, relying on her social networks was critical and proved helpful. She reached out to a former Canadian CA who invited her to work together at a non-profit in their city back home.

Many participants who remained in the U.S. throughout their job search expressed deep gratitude for the support systems that helped them navigate this turbulent time as immigrants. They emphasized that finding a job independently, given the lack of guidance from athletic departments and institutions, would have been an incredibly challenging task without these established support networks. Azlan stated

> The process was long and difficult…when I first started looking for a job, I was like, well, this is just not going to work, because during Covid, nobody was hiring. Since I had a connection with [company name removed] from the start, it was easier, I guess, instead of going through the LinkedIn process, I was able to go through the hiring manager and HR directly. It was a plus, see, we are back to my point, that if you are an international and applying for a job on LinkedIn, you

> will not get through, unless you know someone that can filter the resumes, to put you at first no matter how good you are.

She added that her position in the workforce today allows her to see the role of connections play out firsthand. On the other side now, she is able to help others "get jobs or positions and just get them hired."

Even with the presence of social and professional networks, navigating the job market as an ICA with little to no knowledge about the U.S. workforce and its norms was a challenge. It required participants to consistently hustle to find suitable opportunities throughout the job search phase. Additionally, Chief's hustle extended beyond just networking. He juggled a demanding academic schedule in his senior year doing an unpaid internship and built a strong relationship with his supervisor who, in turn, became a valuable career advocate and recommended him for jobs.

Jay, another participant, exemplified the impact of even one supportive connection during the job search. He also discussed the amount of time and energy it took to make this job opportunity work in his favor. He shared,

> I was visiting St. Louis, Missouri on a trip with my friends and I went and got a rental car and drove to this university about two hours away and started knocking on the doors of the director of football academics…he took me in for the day and like showed me how they did things and then I kept in touch with…and then he posted on Twitter that he's hiring a job and I saw it on Twitter, it was part of my 280 jobs I applied and then yeah, I kind of went from there, because they were looking for someone to come in and help an international relations, because they didn't have good services here for international student-athletes and so I fit the

> mold perfectly of having that student-athlete development background with being an international so it was a perfect storm which makes me nervous because it was like if I didn't get this like when would there have been a next job or was like it was just too perfect, it was a whirlwind to end up.

Jay's experience highlights how a single connection can make a world of difference in a competitive job market. Furthermore, his narrative underscores the uncertainty and desperation that ICAs face when navigating their professional path in the U.S. His story illustrates the monumental effort required to establish relationships and seize opportunities. Similarly, Peter's story mirrors Jay's experience of facing numerous rejections during the job search process. He elaborates,

> So, I don't know if I'm lucky or what it is, but I really wanted to get into the corporates. Because in 2018 I attended to an event, I met a few people from Wilson and I really liked the vibe and the environment and I said, okay, one day I'm going to work there. For the last year in college, I was trying to meet as many people as I could and tried to get recommendations and things like that. It didn't work out. I applied for seven jobs and got rejected in all of them. But I got a giveaway racket from Wilson at an event…I just thought I'll give it a review…I did a 15-page review of the racket and they didn't expect that and they were like, okay, this guy really knows about products, let's try to get him involved with the brand. They started sponsoring me…I mean ended up getting the job. So, it was lucky. But at the same time, I've been trying for a year-and-a-half to get people within the company to get to know people. So that's how I got it.

Going above and beyond demonstrated Peter's enthusiasm for the job, as well as his understanding of the products and skills he could contribute to the organization, ultimately proving to be beneficial for him. Overall, these participants' job-hunting experiences are a testament to their relentless hustle, resilience, resourcefulness, and a "never give up" attitude that helped them navigate a challenging and uncertain time in their lives.

Nicole's journey contrasted sharply with the hustle and networking required by many ICAs. Instead of venturing outside her institution to build connections and seek job opportunities, she had the unique advantage of sharing a strong professional relationship with her coach, spanning over four years of college athletics. The coach recognized Nicole's work ethic and passion for the sport and became instrumental in her career path. Following her graduation, the coach recruited Nicole as a volunteer assistant at her new institution. This seemingly serendipitous timing, coupled with Nicole's proven abilities, paved the way for a seamless transition. "Knowing this offer reduced my stress level," Nicole shared, "I knew we'd work well together, and I'd be in good hands. Plus, since I knew her, it felt like family, like a connection. I wouldn't be lost or starting from scratch. I'd had enough of that."

Exclusionary Employer Policies, Federal Practices, and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments

Learning about the visa laws and immigration policies, understanding how they apply to oneself, and following the rules and restrictions that come with it is a daunting task for all immigrants, including ICAs navigating the student-to-employee transition in the U.S. For all participants, except Romario, who chose to get married for a green card, the pressure to secure employment was tremendous. It was also intertwined with navigating complex and exclusionary organizational and federal immigration policies. The ticking clock of work authorization deadlines and the constant threat of deportation added a layer of urgency and stress to their job

search. U.S. HEIs, corporate companies, and other organizations often do not help relieve any of that stress. Instead, they added to the anxiety due to their lack of communication and lack of understanding of immigration and visa complexities in immigrant hiring. Findings suggested policies and employers can be discriminatory and engage in convenience hiring to eliminate the extra costs and procedures associated with visa sponsorship. Unfortunately, this pathway pursued by many of the companies in the U.S. led to the immediate rejection of ICAs based on their immigration status. Such outcomes led to those with "permanent residency and American citizenship to get job opportunities" stated John.

Many participants who did not experience outright rejection, faced complete silence from employers' end after submitting applications. Only a handful received any response, and often those were automated rejection emails. The ICAs' frustration stemmed not only from the lack of feedback but also from the sense of being dismissed even before they had a chance to prove themselves. For many, the standard question about visa sponsorship became an automatic barrier, shutting them out before their carefully crafted cover letters and resumes were even considered. It was a disheartening realization: being an international applicant seemed to be an immediate disqualifier, precluding any consideration of their skills and qualifications.

All those email responses included phrases such as "sorry, we cannot hire you at this time," "we do not hire international applicants," and "we do not sponsor visas at this time." Some ICAs also mentioned how the application portal they were using was terminated mid-process as soon as they selected the "require sponsorship" icon on the web. Jay expressed his disappointment with employers during the job search phase, especially with his alma mater, who first wanted to hire him, then turned their back on him once they learned he would require sponsorship to work and reside in the U.S.

> I applied to 283 jobs, I got maybe 80 odd interviews like there was a good amount of interest, but I would get to either taking, do you need sponsorship, or I have to say in an interview that I need it and I'd never hear from them again. There was actually one case where my alma mater offered me a job, I accepted very excited, told friends, family that I'm staying in [American State], wahoo!, and then they called me two days later to say that they can't do it because of the H-1B and so that shattered. They don't do any H1B visas period, so I couldn't go there and that was really tough… I'm left like did you not know that before?

In retrospect, Jay expanded on what he learnt from this instance and his time navigating the U.S. workforce and how hard the U.S. government makes it for the employee and employer to figure out work permit and authorization paperwork:

> I would say 90% of schools either didn't understand the process and so they were just scared away by that by not understanding it. I was going back and forth countless times deciding when I would bring it up to people. That's something that all internationals have had to deal with do you say it [I need a visa sponsorship)]at the start? Do you bring it up in your first interview? Do you wait till they offer you? Like it's difficult because a lot of the time they don't know what it even means. I was fortunate the next time around…[university name removed] was like we'll figure it out. They were like yeah, we want to hire you and the rest of it will figure out and that I was fortunate…but yeah, I'll put it this way they probably won't hire another international again. I might have been the last one, but yeah, the biggest thing was the H1B, it's just a lot.

When I asked Azlan what her experience was like getting several rejection emails from companies where she applied to jobs, she shared,

> As an international student, you just have to have a sense of humor because, you're going to get ridiculed and made fun of, for being an international, and for going through these processes…one day I just asked myself, am I going to die if I'm not here? No. And there are other countries in the world, but because opportunity-wise, this place has so much, there's opportunity in every place and every corner, which is something we're not used to in our country unless you are the 1%. … If I was American, in this country, oh my God! Unstoppable! I would have no problems. I would have job offers and I would have things that I could do. For now, it is that I just can't.

While elaborating on how she handled rejections from employers, she also pointed to how life could be so different if she was born in the U.S. with the same skill sets. Thus, showing the great amounts of inequities and unfair practices that exist towards immigrants in this country.

While applying online and quickly finding out about rejection is disheartening, looking for jobs and meeting employers in person was quite a challenge for ICAs, especially for those whose first language was not English. They shared how anti-immigrant and discriminatory responses were not only present on online portals and written communication channels but also during in-person career fairs, interviews, networking calls, and events. For example, John attended a networking event where multiple employers told her to her face that she would not be hired because she is not American and because she does not bring anything to the table that an American cannot bring. One of the employers told her "you're just not American, we would hire you right now if you were American." Another time, she had multiple social connections who

were able to get her in touch with employer connections. However, employers still told her “we would literally hire you on the spot right now. But we can't because you're not American.” She said I was shocked that they “literally said that to my face and I was like whaattt? [spelling reflects tone]” While these employers’ comments are discriminatory, organizations sometimes are instructed not to hire an immigrant if they have an equally qualified American candidate. Thus, more so, companies reinforce outdated and anti-immigrant visa policies. This direct rejection, and exclusionary and anti-immigrant discourse that perpetuates problematic visa laws, was also experienced by several others who met employers in person during their job search period. Kate expressed her dilemma with the job search process. Clearly, the employers were impressed with her but wouldn’t hire her. She stated,

> Every time I get in an interview and I'm talking with like employers and stuff, they're getting so excited about me playing sports, but they never kind of want to hire me which doesn't make sense. Like I got so many interviewers who they were like “how did you manage to be a student-athlete and like play sports and study at the same time and study in a major like as hard as civil engineering?”

Upon elaborating, she said the only reason this was happening was because employers were concerned about the visa sponsorship and immigration paperwork. Additionally, Nicole mentioned that going through this process and repeatedly getting insulted was awful. It reached a point where she would not wait for the employers at networking events and career fairs to ask her about visa sponsorship. Instead, she would ask them “do you sponsor international student work visas?” up front so she could save herself some time and sanity.

In addition to these anti-immigrant hiring discourses and practices, Azlan also discussed how she pursued a degree in business, which was not considered a STEM major, which became a

disadvantage. In the U.S., pursuing a STEM major provides additional benefits to an international student. They can obtain a 3-year OPT instead of the one-year OPT for those who pursue non-STEM majors. Her major choice made Azlan feel as though she was further looked down upon in the job hunt by most employers. She expressed how she felt cheated by the U.S. government which "does not consider it specialized and worthy enough to pursue a business degree for long-term visa sponsorship." Nicole's experience also resonated with this theme. She added,

> I get the OPT after graduation but it's only for one year and I get the degree in business so I don't really separate myself to a higher category to get three years [STEM degree]…I got an interview here but whenever I talk about the visa they always say oh, no, we can't really sponsor you because it's not something within the government guidelines, it's not the special category[non-STEM degrees].

The distinction between OPT durations for STEM and non-STEM fields (three years vs. one year) creates a significant challenge for non-STEM graduates. This limited timeframe essentially allows only one attempt at the H-1B visa lottery if ICAs wish to remain in the U.S. This situation raises concerns about the potential for a system that encourages companies to extract international talent with specialized skills but may not offer a clear path for long-term career development.

While STEM degrees are considered more prestigious and give international students more opportunities after graduation, employers and the U.S. government often make exceptions when it benefits them most. For example, those who choose to study in non-STEM majors and then pursue academic-specific careers in U.S. HEIs and therefore serve the American higher education community, like Sam and Jay in this study, were bounded by no time or major-related

restrictions on work visas (USCIS, 2024). Additionally, those who have non-STEM related specialized skills like working with immigrant populations in social work, diverse linguistic capabilities, etc., like Chief, also found it relatively easier to find jobs while still bounded by OPT time restrictions. Tom also pursued a non-STEM major and was seen as someone with special skills due to his ability to speak Danish. While it was hard for him to find jobs, he did stumble upon an opportunity in an organization that saw his linguistic diversity as a strength. They ended up hiring him for one year, the length of his OPT. He shared,

> It was this third party, [company name removed], this company that recruits people with a language skill and some business acumen to work for specific corporate teams mainly because of their ability to work in the States…Basically, I was writing ads for the Dutch customers. Very repetitive work and I had to just follow the company's guidelines. That was the only job I could actually get with my OPT.

Tom shared he did not learn much but enjoyed his time in California during this job's stint before he was forced to go back to Europe at the end of his OPT even though his employer loved his work. He felt like they just used his skillset for their benefit and then "moved on to the next OPT catch [F1 student with one year OPT] and then the next and so on, their world at [company name removed] did not stop." He said, however, he had to immediately pack up and leave a country he called home for over five years, "It's not easy, it's tough to make this transition at this stage of life." Another participant, Nicole, when sharing her job search journey expressed her frustration with such STEM versus non-STEM OPT work visa-related rules:

> Make the process easier and give everyone a chance. All international students, they're good. Not all Americans are good, but I feel the international student-

> athletes and the ones who want to stay here, I think they work hard really hard to achieve their goal and then they really want to be here so they can show the passion for what they do. Again, when you give me the opportunity, I'll show you what I can do, regardless of STEM or not, but if you can't even give me the opportunity to stay here then how can I prove myself that I'm better than everyone else?

This brought to light a crucial issue of equity within the U.S. job market for ISs. Throughout our discussion, she advocated to see equal opportunities for all, regardless of whether their skills directly benefit the U.S. economy. It's important to remember that all ISs pursuing undergraduate degrees, regardless of their field, invest significantly in their U.S. education. Therefore, according to Nicole, to possess talents and capabilities that deserve consideration, not just those deemed immediately applicable to the U.S. job market. Unfortunately, current policies and employer practices often create an unfair and unequal system, leaving many stranded and struggling to navigate their job search after graduation, whether immediately or within the limited one-year grace period. This inequity demands serious attention and calls for a shift towards a more inclusive and meritocratic approach that values the diverse contributions of all international students.

At times it can become apparent to employers how desperate an individual is to be employed and stay in the country. While this sense of desperation made some ICAs feel insufficient about themselves, U.S.-based employers were seen as taking advantage of the desperation felt by participants in this study. Megha and Michelle expressed feelings of being taken for granted, exploited, and seen as cheap labor for organizations and corporate firms trying to hire them. They shared how employers were offering extremely low salaries for all the labor

they expected in return. Michelle expressed her disappointment in the salary a journalism company was willing to pay her to overwork at random hours of the day. Megha shared

> I went to a few interviews where they were really like, ‘oh, you're, you're gonna be here on an OPT and then you're going to be here for a year, and do we know if you're going to stay?

She added,

> I think that was, that was a disadvantage… it was very low paying, like extremely low. It's like, to think for me to work for $11-12 dollars an hour, I mean, that's just ridiculous. Ridiculous. Like how are you going to pay me this money? Like, how are you going to do that? It just made no sense to me. Yeah. I mean, working for $11 when I think about it now, I just want to say fuck you!

Eventually, both Megha and Michelle ended up declining the offers and going home as other offers did not work out. Especially in Michelle’s case, even when certain job opportunities came to fruition, they wanted her to have a longer work permit, which, unfortunately, her OPT did not allow.

Lastly, in addition to the employer-based biases due to STEM versus non-STEM OPT rules enforced by the federal government and the USCIS, several participants pointed to the lack of options and freedom they had to take a breather if they chose to stay in the U.S. right after graduation. They felt rushed and forced to make decisions about their next steps. Many alluded to how they were exhausted and needed a break. Azlan openly discussed her physical, mental, and emotional state after graduation:

> Leaving sport is always tough because you're not used to it, I mean, you're going to stop playing and training for five hours a day. It's tough mentally, not so tough

> on your body, because I think my body most definitely needed it. I think grinding my life away the last 18 years has been extremely tough on my body. And now, I'm finally starting to be able to focus on rehabbing and taking some rest and getting my body back to where a regular human should feel when they walk, and not to take a break, like every time they take a step, which I still feel like that, I can take the stairs sometimes when it's cold and I'm 23. So, it's like that to me is insane that, I feel like my body is lived three lifetimes, as compared to my mind. Actually, no, they both have lived three lifetimes (laughs). But then mentally, it's not easy because you, you give up your sport and you have to transition…. So, managing myself and all these issues while also deciding on a job is just hard.

ISs are given 60 days to be a tourist then pack up and leave the U.S. or apply for an OPT just before or right after graduation, and immediately job hunt. They are forced to find a job within 90 days of graduation. These timelines set forth by the USCIS were even more mentally and physically exhausting, especially after ending strenuous and competitive intercollegiate athletic and academic careers. Maria mentioned,

> Particularly international student-athletes have the mentality of, "I need to get this done" whereas my American friends, they're a little bit more laid back because they don't have as much riding on it. They know that they can take a gap year if they wanted, they know that they can go back home. I don't have a home to go back to. So, if I wanted to take a couple months off school, who's paying for that? Or take a couple months off just to rest, I can't do that. Even my boyfriend, so he's a couple years older than me and he's American, he took a year out of

> school after his bachelor's before his master's because he didn't know what he wanted to do and he could do that. If I wanted to take a year off, I'd be back home and not have the opportunity to stay in America.

This lack of flexibility and strict timelines for all ISs, especially ICAs, after ending their athletic careers, is a severe challenge. It did not allow many participants to take a break. Instead, they were forced to rush into finding a way to stay in the U.S., if they chose to do so, to become a part of the U.S. workforce after completing their stint as underserved and discriminated sport labor migrants just to try and make a better life for themselves, what they perceived as the 'American Dream' when they left home.

Despite this, many of the ICAs eventually found jobs. However, only two of the ICAs encountered relatively immigrant-friendly employers during their job search journey who were willing to advocate for the ICA and push for modification of their organization's anti-immigrant policies. These employers made significant efforts to adjust their convenience hiring policies. Azlan shared,

> The fact that I feel like I have to work 15 times harder than everybody else is crazy. Also, just because I'm international, I feel like I owe the company something because this company is doing my visa paperwork. It is the first time that I don't have to look at a set of forms and figure it out all my own, it's like a breath of fresh air.

Securing this job allowed Azlan to take a moment to breathe and experience a profound sense of relief. However, it also underscored the significance of her work sponsorship agreement from the company, which was rooted in her feelings of "owing" something to the company. In a country where she had often felt exploited and deceived for many years, this opportunity enabled her to

push aside those negative experiences almost instantly. Instead, she felt a sense of gratitude towards the company for treating her fairly and offering equal opportunities to both immigrants and American graduates.

Chief applied for a job with a social work organization. The employer hosting his job interview loved his interview and wanted to hire him to cater to the diverse refugee population the organization catered for from countries in Africa. The employer believed he would be the best fit as a South African Black man as he could understand the culture and behaviors of those they served from Africa. While his hiring would benefit the organization, his now supervisor did go above and beyond to navigate organizational rules and paperwork to give him this opportunity. It was because of their efforts to support immigrant workers in social work, rare to see in the U.S. workforce, that Chief was able to achieve his dream of serving immigrant people and others in America.

Finally, finding solutions to work and stay in the U.S. was not easy amongst such restrictive and unfair practices from all ends—underserved by the NCAA and athletic departments, uneducated by ISS offices, convenience, and selective hiring by U.S. employers, and outdated and anti-immigrant visa laws and immigration policies. This was felt by almost all participants, including Jack who expressed,

> It's tough on the visas and immigration. At the end of the day, we're not a refugee…But, we're still trying to move away from home forever and start a new life here, sport and also in the sense of after sport now but not getting much help from the government or school.

He further added, “finding this job wasn’t easy either.” This underscores the pervasive difficulties at every stage of their journey through U.S. higher education. It illuminates the stark

reality that Jack and others are treated as athletic labor migrants, recruited, and valued solely for their sporting prowess. Their education and well-being often fall by the wayside, replaced by exclusion and discrimination from various actors within the system.

Overall, participants who stayed positive while facing adversity and persevered through this time and its challenges were able to find a way to stay in the U.S. Some finally found supportive employers during the job search, and others started to work at universities that sponsor cap-exempt H-1B visas, while the rest did short gigs for the duration of their OPTs before going home or pursuing a graduate degree in the U.S. while working part-time on campus. For those participants who pursued the path of earning multiple degrees, they went through the job search multiple times before successfully navigating their long-term goal of residing in the U.S. and finding an employer sponsor for their H-1B work visa.

Impact of Major and Degree's Applicability/Transference in the Job Market

As touched upon previously, one's choice of college degree major can have a significant impact on their future, especially for ISs and ICAs. However, for participants in this study, most were unaware of the U.S. education system and what it means to pursue a major, add a minor, or choose electives. They were automatically enrolled in classes by academic advisors, even prior to arrival on campus, to pursue generic majors like communication, psychology, or business administration, amongst several others. Only a few were able to choose a major of their choice, out of which four participants in this study pursued STEM majors. Of the four who pursued STEM degrees, two did so unintendedly without awareness of OPT benefits. While discussing the impact of major selection during the interview, John, with great regret, expressed,

> Once I was done, I mean, it was like, 'oh crap, like all of this happens now [looking for jobs].' And then while looking for jobs, I was like, 'man, I should have majored in computer science.' My life would be easy if I did that. I mean, if

> I realized that sooner and knew better, I'm so certain I would not have majored in the same thing. Like very certain I would change my major to something STEM. So, I could be more free.

Azlan had similar sentiments regarding her lack of knowledge, and how looking back she would have pursued a different academic path:

> I didn't know anything about majors, or OPT, or how much time you get because of this and that and whatnot. I would still double-major but would have done management and analytics, or management and psychology, or something or anything that was a STEM. I wouldn't have done something that will just give me one year OPT, right? And I don't think people know that I didn't.

Both alluded to the importance of major selection and suggested that it should be an important aspect of an ICA's preparation since it has such a long-lasting impact on our career and ability to stay in the U.S.

Unsurprisingly, none of the ICAs reported being advised by their academic advisors to pursue STEM degrees. Prioritization of athletic eligibility seemed to take precedence, with a tendency to steer ICAs towards "easier" majors. This approach, driven either by individual advisors or administrative pressure, often left ICAs unprepared for the realities of life beyond college sports. In contrast, participants with STEM degrees were able to leverage those qualifications during the job search. The extended OPT eligibility associated with STEM fields (3 years vs. 1 year for non-STEM) provided them with a potential advantage in securing employment and potentially negotiating OPT extensions with employers.

Several other participants also shared their experiences about how majors directly impacted their work permit longevity, which then impacted their job search and ability to stay in

the U.S. Michelle, for example, chose to leave the U.S. for a few reasons, one of which was her inability to find a job:

> I think it was more to do with my major and a column of the major…I had friends who went into accounting [considered STEM] who are also doing athletics and they were like basically recruited by accounting firms who were going to like pay for their visas and pay for everything. So, I think that they were in like much better positions.

Romario on the other hand, found a job but struggled to use his degree for what he had planned to do. He pursued a bachelor's in criminology and wanted to work in the U.S. police or Army. He stated, "I went through the process with a couple of police departments, but I didn't go through fully." Nobody ever told him how these organizations do not hire immigrant populations. It is mandatory to be American for such federal and state government jobs unless one is being hired under a special quota, i.e., linguistic diversity, international relations deployment, etc. Peter and Victoria, a women's tennis player from Venezuela, even after pursuing STEM degrees, navigated employment challenges. Peter ended up leaving the U.S. after his three years of OPT as his OPT expired and his H-1B lottery ticket never got picked up, even after his company applied for it twice. Kate still resides in the U.S. but struggled to understand the nuances of the OPT in practice. She questioned,

> why you also have to relate it [the job] to your major and it's kind of a lot of things that you're supposed to have figured out and it's like, what? Why do you want to keep making it harder?

She felt restricted and claustrophobic during her job search. Additionally, she believed such rules, even after completing a degree in civil engineering, were not fair since she wanted to add diverse work experiences throughout her career path.

Most participants shared their thoughts and stories related to what they could and should have changed during their undergraduate career to be better prepared, at least academically on paper, for this career transition. Tom expressed,

> I only got a one-year OPT. I was trying to make things happen and that didn't really work out. Looking back, I probably should have not done a double bachelor, but instead rushed through my bachelor's and got a master's. Oh, well, I wasn't sure what to do but the masters might have helped me stay in the States.

This thought proved to be true for all of the study's participants. Choice of major during undergraduate studies, and its impact on restrictive visa policies, forced many ICAs who wanted to remain in the U.S. to do a graduate degree to be able to stay and work in the U.S. They pursued it either right after finishing their intercollegiate athletics career or after the completion of their one-year OPT. 14 of the 25 participants pursued master's degrees in the U.S., out of whom 13 continue to reside in the U.S. For many of these individuals, going back to school was a necessity to be able to stay in the U.S. instead of it being a career choice. Nicole shared,

> My major was not specialized enough. It's not as important enough for them to hire an international, a foreign employee for this job because it's still entry-level. An American can do it probably. So, there's that…So, I ended up getting an IT [information technology] degree and that's like STEM.

Others followed similar paths and were able to pursue graduate degrees in fields of their choice. However, most of them pursued pure STEM options, while others tried to tie their majors into

something that would provide benefits similar to STEM degrees. For example, “I started to like the business program and then I changed in like time to the engineering management program which is both engineering and business…I was lucky that changed on time and made it STEM...I didn't lose my two extra years of OPT,” stated Kate who was able to change her degree coursework early on in her first semester and convert her otherwise non-STEM business degree to one recognized as a STEM field.

While most regretted not choosing STEM-specific majors during undergraduate studies, some pursued master’s degrees in STEM fields to stay in the U.S. However, for two participants, Jack and Michelle, the major choice did not matter. Close to their respective graduations, they found out they had backup visa options to stay in the U.S. Michelle’s country, Canada, and Jack’s country, Australia, had alternative visa options for employment of individuals from these countries in the U.S. Jack expressed, “I was fortunate enough as Australian, I could always get an E-3 visa. Which is pretty simple and easy to get, just for Australians. So that wasn't an issue with the H-1B if I didn't get that, which I did.” He also acknowledged, “I’m Australian and I could go back, get an E-3. But someone like from India in my situation, would be screwed if their employer backed out on sponsoring visa.” This shows how prevalent inequities and racist structures are within U.S. immigration policy. They openly build relationships with certain (majority white, English-speaking) countries while limiting opportunities for others. Michelle, on the other hand, left to go back to Canada because of several factors, including a lack of job opportunities in Journalism and the U.S. political climate. She further shared:

> There's like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and there's a bunch of jobs that fall into that category that you can apply every year, but it's very specific jobs like technical publications writer, doctor, nurse like just very

> kind of random ones. So yeah, I didn't fall into any of those categories, and I wasn't able to come back for any of those reasons.

Again, such treaties allow Canadians to navigate a relatively easier path, if job seekers are aware, and choose to pursue fields in specific majors over others. Both Australia and Canada, both predominately white countries, are better supported by U.S. immigration compared to others—showing how immigration-related discrimination occurs based on country of origin and provides unfair advantages to those from more privileged nations.

Another interesting finding addressed the importance of internships in the job search process. While previous sections noted that managing athletic time demands and coach expectations while attempting to find and secure internship opportunities was extremely challenging, some participants still managed to engage in this career readiness/professional development opportunity. They seemed to learn from their personal and professional connections about how important this opportunity can be from an experienced and professional resume-building standpoint. For Chief and Ashley, it was also a part of their curriculum. Ashley, a Brazilian soccer player, shared,

> I was intern with them, well for my major, I had to get an internship to graduate, so I was interning with them already my junior and senior year. Junior year was legally, senior year was just me going there, like not letting them like forget me, because like I need this job when I graduate, so not getting any credit, not getting paid, just driving to Orlando every single day...So, that was my senior year and then I graduated, they offered me a job there. So, then I moved to Orlando, graduated on a Friday, sorry graduated on a Saturday, Monday I started work.

She shared that it was because of this job that she has a green card today. The supervisor, a fellow Brazilian, understood her situation and offered to support her immigration journey in the U.S., just like someone once did for him. Such experiences made her believe "there is hope and there are some good people in the world." Chief was able to get his first job because his internship supervisor endorsed his work and wrote him a recommendation letter: "Without this internship to do social work after graduation…I would be lost." Overall, ICAs who pursued internship opportunities had to overlook their mental health, social well-being, and other aspects of their life while only focusing on sports, academics, and gaining work experience. All participants in the study who pursued an internship ended up getting a job and continue to live in the U.S. today.

Lastly, participant experiences with degree transference were significantly visible throughout this study. Six of the former ICAs who returned home discussed their experience with degree transference or lack thereof. After they were unable to find jobs in the U.S. several also struggled to navigate the job market and find jobs back home as well. Cameron expressed her concerns:

> How will my degree translate in the UK? Like how do I get across everything I've done here because a lot of the systems and everything set up to prepare athletes for work and after graduation were very much tailored around American athletes… I had to change my resume completely and write things differently and interview differently.

After a year of doing this work, tailoring her materials to suit the UK job market, and running a home-based bakery business, she finally found a job. It was even more challenging for Megha, who completed her business program in the U.S. with over 3.5 GPA:

> Bachelor's degree from the U.S. doesn't hold enough credit in Denmark, to start working like, you basically, you cannot get into the job market with a bachelor's degree from the U.S. So, I knew all along, that I would need to start studying again, to get a proper job…I applied for a master's program at [a Denmark-based school name removed].

Michelle was in a similar boat. Canada lacked workforce opportunities in the journalism field, which pushed her to switch career paths. Upon making these decisions, she felt lost. She chose to share her journey with me with a hint of sadness and expressed she still misses doing journalism work.

> I came home; I was like, what am I going to do? And I felt like, especially because I've done my internship and degree in the states, I didn't have any kind of connection here with any organizations here… And I just felt like it was really hard from that perspective, and I felt like if I had gone to a university here, I would have been way better prepared to enter the journalism world here. So that was frustrating since, like, do I need to go back to school here? Do I need to do another year of your program or a certificate or something like that?... I ended up doing certifications in Real Estate and work as an agent now.

Nim, also shared her experience upon returning home. People looked at her differently and spoke negatively about the time she spent in America:

> they're like oh my God, you went to America like you went to college…oh you're not going to get a job, your degree is not applicable here, you won't be able to do anything with that, you didn't go to a good university, you're like not going to be qualified.

She struggled to find a job upon her return and ended up working as a tennis coach at a recreational club near her house. Such examples showed how uncertain ICAs' post-athletics lives were, even after pursuing a so-called "world-class education," once they return to their home countries. Unlike the participants mentioned above, two participants, both individuals of color from countries in Asia and Africa, had positive experiences to share about finding a job back home. Patrick mentioned, "I'm very satisfied and I think because of being a student-athlete and getting an education from the U.S., and coming back to my country, it opened me to a lot of doors of good opportunity." Hana also shared how she was easily able to use her sport, basketball, and her degree from the U.S. to start working for an African basketball league. Overall, based on participant experiences, the results suggested that an American degree did not hold much transfer value in European countries, Canada, and Australia. However, for both participants from Egypt and Thailand, the U.S. degree and their college sports experience did weigh positively in their job search experiences.

Summary

Finding a job after graduation was a universally acknowledged hurdle, a challenge for students across disciplines and backgrounds. For ICAs, this challenge took on a new dimension of complexity, morphing into a maze filled with unique obstacles. Twenty-three out of the 25 participants looked for jobs in the U.S. The two other participants who did not were Nim, who was forced to return due to the visa restriction during COVID-19 and never returned to the U.S., and Patrick, who always knew he wanted to go back to his country. However, he stated, "I didn't even know how longer we could stay…if I knew, and if we could have spent more time maybe like to figure out what we wanted to do or to find a job then maybe I could have." Of the 23 who looked for jobs 15 found temporary or permanent work opportunities in the U.S. Eight of the 23 had to return home after trying but experiencing an unsuccessful job search journey in the U.S.

once their 90-day unemployment window came to an end. Overall, 15 out of the 25 work and reside in the U.S. today and the 10 others pursue graduate school or employment opportunities in their home country or another country close to home.

Findings suggested that ICAs faced an additional layer of hurdles: the ever-shifting sands of visa and immigration regulations, the ticking clock of work authorization timelines, and the mountains of paperwork associated with OPTs, H1Bs, and the elusive green card. Beyond tackling these bureaucratic regulations, participants often lacked the crucial cultural capital needed to navigate the intricacies of the American job market. ICAs entered U.S. high education unaware of timelines of work permit applications and more than half missed out on information related to different things like SSN, when to file OPT, and more during their job search and early employment stages. Unlike some domestic athletes, who benefit from parents and family networks privy to the hidden pathways of specific industries, they often navigated this unfamiliar territory solo, building social capital from scratch. This disadvantage became even more pronounced when considering the discriminatory biases encountered by some based on their nationality or country of origin, adding another layer of difficulty to their already arduous journey. Financial constraints further complicated the picture. For some, the pressure to find employment was immediate, driven by the need to secure work authorization and maintain financial stability. Others grappled with the applicability of their chosen degrees in the U.S. For those considering returning home, the complexities of degree transference loomed large, adding another layer of uncertainty to their post-graduation plans.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This dissertation explored and examined the transition out of sport experiences of former DI international college athletes (ICAs) who are currently in the workforce. More specifically, former ICA experiences as it related to career readiness and navigating the job search phase of their transition out of sport and into the workforce. Recognizing that athletes often gain a more critical perspective of their athletic experience after leaving the competitive environments (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016), this study prioritized narratives from former ICAs who have transitioned out of college sports since they were able to provide valuable insights about career readiness and their transition to the workforce. In doing so, participants reflected on how their experiences were indicative of larger systemic issues. They were critical of the policies and practices within college sports as well as at the federal level echoing larger organizational efforts for reform.

All participants, regardless of their sport, felt unprepared and had a unique journey navigating their life after sport before entering the workforce. Throughout their reflections, a recurring sentiment emerged from participant narratives: many of them perceived themselves as exploited and all participants felt a sense of betrayal and unfair treatment by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), its member institutions, specifically athletic departments, and its stakeholders. These findings were consistent with previous college athlete (CA) exploitation literature (Commeaux & Grummert, 2020; Gayles et al., 2022; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013; Hawkins, 2010), indicating participants felt their well-being was of no concern over athletic participation and performance. Similarly, ICAs felt they were used for their athletic talents and were disposed of after their collegiate sports careers came to an end.

By centering former DI ICA experiences and using sport labor migration as this study's theoretical framework, findings revealed that despite being sought out for their athletic abilities and the economic and cultural contributions they bring to U.S. institutions, ICAs were perceived and treated as mere commodities valued solely for their athletic performances. This finding aligned with the limited sport labor migration literature that exists about the CA population (Bale, 1991; Frawley, 2015; Holman, 2007; Maguire, 1996, 2004; Pierce et al., 2011; Weston, 2006). The "holistic collegiate experience" promised by the NCAA, coaches, and support staff within athletics (Bale, 1987; Hong, 2018; Love & Kim, 2011; Simiyu, 2012) frequently gave way to a reality dominated by relentless athletic demands, inadequate support systems and structures for career development. Thus, prioritized institutional gain over individual needs and aspirations left ICAs unfulfilled and unprepared for the future.

The study highlighted how participants, particularly ICAs from underdeveloped continents of Asia, Africa, South America, and regions of the Caribbean, lacked an understanding of the commercial nature of U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) and the intricacies of the college sports model. They had a misconstrued perception of what it means to study, live, and play sports in this country due to how the U.S. is discussed and packaged in their home country by their family, friends, and national media. As discussed in previous literature, participants, particularly those from racial and ethnic underrepresented communities, believed moving to the U.S. would provide them with world-class academic and athletic opportunities, as well as a pathway for upward social mobility (Beamon, 2008; Bista & Gaulee, 2017). This was also highlighted through this study's findings as participants arrived in the U.S. with high hopes for education and athletics, but faced post-graduation struggles and disillusionment, highlighting a potential gap between expectations and realities for ICAs.

ICAs' transition out of sport journeys presented a unique set of challenges along the way. These challenges included heightened athletic demands, lack of career preparedness structures and support systems, and limited time dedicated to academic and professional growth. Additionally, ICAs navigated visa and immigration complexities and faced anti-immigrant sentiments when looking for jobs. Through all aspects of their career preparation phase and this transition, ICAs were blind-sided, unserved, and exploited for their skills, reinforcing their role as sport labor migrants for U.S. HEIs, especially within athletic departments, which are often seen as front porches of the profit-driven institutions (Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Those who successfully navigated this tumultuous time of their lives built social capital along the way and put forth extreme efforts to navigate career pathways in the U.S. or other countries. To further examine this population's experience through this exploratory study's findings, I expand on these insights and discuss findings in relation to existing literature as organized by chapter.

Discussing Participant Career Readiness and Support Services and Structures

With respect to Chapter Four findings, copious research literature has documented ICA experiences related to recruitment (Bale, 1991; Charitonidi & Kaburakis, 2022; Fountain & Finley, 2009; Hextrum, 2018; Foo et al., 2015; Jara, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a) and on-campus experiences (Baghurst et al., 2018; Forbes-Mewett, & Pape, 2019; Lee & opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Newell & Sethi, 2023; Pericak et al., 2023; Pierce et al., 2011; Sethi et al., 2022; Sethi & Hextrum; 2024; Streno et al., 2020). However, little work has briefly discussed the career readiness aspect of ICA lives (Foster & Lally, 2021; Newell, 2015; Stewart, 2012).

Like Foster and Lally's (2021) findings, ICAs in this study recognized the value of the intercollegiate athletics experience in developing time management skills, which they continue to utilize in their professional lives. However, this study goes beyond their work by highlighting the

need for ICAs to acquire more tangible career-related skills to ensure a successful transition after graduation. Time management, while valuable, may not solely be a result of the collegiate athletic experience and might not directly translate to the workforce. Furthermore, this study's findings challenge Foster and Lally's (2021) notion that college sports foster resilience in ICAs. Unlike their study, participants of this study attributed their resilience to overcoming challenges associated with their immigrant experiences in the U.S., rather than athletics. Additionally, while Foster and Lally's participants leveraged athletic connections after graduation, ICAs in this study encountered disadvantages due to missed career-related networking opportunities caused by demanding athletic schedules.

Supporting Stewart's (2012) research, this study found that participants frequently delayed career planning, ultimately limiting their post-graduation job opportunities in the U.S. To investigate the roots of this delay, this dissertation explored the factors contributing to the observed career decision-making delays. Unlike domestic college athletes (DCAs), ICAs often lacked awareness and education about career paths available in the U.S. Many participants did not consider working in the U.S. as a viable option, and they had limited understanding of the complexities of U.S. visas and immigration processes. This lack of "cultural capital" (knowledge of the U.S. workforce) and "social capital" (professional networks to navigate the system) compared to DCAs led them to postpone planning for their post-athletic careers. This ultimately disadvantaged them during their transition out of athletics.

Compounding the lack of awareness, none of the participating ICAs received a career roadmap or preparation program upon arrival at their HEIs or any point during their studies. The participants themselves suggested key elements for such roadmaps: timelines for work visa applications, explanations, and enrollment processes for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and

Optional Practical Training (OPT), navigating U.S. employment options, identifying immigrant-friendly employers, crafting effective job application materials, and attending workshops on workforce fundamentals, especially for non-native English speakers. This lack of informational resources, structure, and guidance exacerbated the existing knowledge gap and perpetuated a state of uncertainty for ICAs. As Bale (1991) noted, even after decades of consistent recruitment, ICAs continue to face an unfair and uncertain path in the U.S. They remain a largely invisible and underserved population, primarily benefiting U.S. HEIs and the U.S. economy as highly skilled sport labor migrants.

Participants' experiences revealed a troubling lack of systemic support for the holistic development and career preparation of ICAs at the NCAA, campus, and athletic department levels. This stood in stark contrast to the promise of a world-class athletic and educational experience that would prepare them for life after sport. While research on CA career readiness and programming initiatives remains scarce, even less attention is paid to the specific needs of this minoritized population (Newell, 2016; Foster & Lally, 2016; Stewart, 2012). This study's findings revealed existing NCAA programs like Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), Careers in Sports Forums, and Student-Athlete Leadership Forums, while already limited in availability, were designed with DCAs in mind and failed to address the unique needs and challenges faced by ICAs. This was particularly evident in the lack of ICA-specific workshops or integration of their needs into existing programs by the NCAA. Furthermore, a concerning finding revealed that over half the participants did not know the NCAA's responsibilities or full governing role in intercollegiate athletics, highlighting the NCAA's minimal engagement with this student population. This lack of involvement exposes a fundamental disregard for the specific needs and challenges of ICAs within the NCAA system, especially considering their

significant contribution–making up over 13% of the college athlete (CA) population and playing a key role in NCAA revenue generation through globalized sports and championships. This disparity between the NCAA's stated commitment to CA well-being and its actual support for ICAs demonstrates a clear gap between rhetoric and reality.

The findings go beyond spotlighting a lack of programmatic support and reveal how the NCAA actively hinders ICAs' chances of expanding their social and professional networks – crucial resources for professional development and successful careers within the U.S. or beyond. Firstly, the study added to the existing critiques of the exploitative nature of the NCAA's amateurism model (Commeaux & Grummert, 2020; Gayles et al., 2022; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013; Hawkins, 2010), demonstrating how it disproportionately disadvantaged ICAs. The strict amateur regulations that restrict all CAs from engaging in professional sports forced participants to adhere to NCAA rules even beyond the boundaries of the U.S., disregarding the cultural, social, and sporting environments of their home countries. This impaired their ability to build professional relationships with fans, club members, potential employers, etc. through their larger non-American sports community. Secondly, the NCAA's apparent lack of communication, care, and advocacy efforts surrounding the introduction of "Name, Image, and Likeness" (NIL) policies left ICAs feeling unsupported and unsure about future opportunities. With the potential to build brands, learn business skills, and develop professional relationships, the absence of clear guidance and advocacy efforts from the NCAA further disadvantaged this already ignored population. It left ICAs questioning whether they continue to be invisible and unable to capitalize on opportunities that could benefit their long-term professional success. These findings add to the existing body of research (Hatteberg, 2018; Southall & Weiler, 2023) indicating how

the NCAA primarily engages in surveillance strategies to control all CAs, and especially ICAs beyond the playing field and across international borders.

Beyond the NCAA, the findings illustrated how DI institutions underprepared ICAs for life after graduation. Overall, there was a lack of effort by U.S. HEIs to engage in career readiness and transition to life after sport programming amongst their campus units like international student services (ISS) and career development, as well as within athletic departments. The ISS office and its staff, the main support structure/system for international students (ISs) on campus, failed to do its job. Their programs and initiatives remained performative. While some utilized ISS offices to fulfill basic tasks like signing travel documents, creating CPT and OPT online coursework, and hosting occasional social events, their involvement still seemed minimal. Overall, ISS, like the NCAA, focused more on surveilling ICAs than guiding ICAs when it came to visa and immigration laws and on and off-campus work engagement regulations. They provided little to no information to ICAs about social security number (SSN), international taxes, building credit history, immigrant-specific job opportunities, work visa laws, what it means to change visa status from an F-1 to OPT, how to obtain an OPT, strategies for engaging with U.S. based employers as immigrants, the importance of pursuing internships, etc.: all of which are key pieces of information and support as ICAs begin to prepare for professional careers in the U.S. workforce.

The effectiveness of ISS was called into question when participants reported being advised to consult external immigration attorneys for basic post-graduation employment procedures by their ISS officers. These external consultations often resulted in impractical solutions, such as marriage being suggested as a path to alleviate immigration concerns, rather than guidance on career development. Referring ICAs to external resources for straightforward

questions that could potentially be addressed by ISS staff or alumni support networks raised concerns about the capacity of ISS to support ICAs empathetically and diligently in navigating post-graduation complexities.

Additionally, the study's findings echo Lee and Opio's (2011) work addressing the lack of attention paid by ISS to distinct national identities of ICAs and its impact on ICAs' experiences in the U.S. This was visible in the participants' frequent discussions around lack of U.S. specific tax education. With little to no exposure to U.S. tax laws provided to ICAs based on their country of origin, many ICAs faced difficulties filing taxes. For example, Michelle, a Canadian citizen, was supposed to file taxes very differently as compared to her other international teammates due to existing tax treaties between the U.S. and Canada—something she was never educated about since her ISS office had one tax education session per year to educate all ISs with a "one size fits all" approach. Additionally, many ICAs never filed taxes or did so incorrectly because they were unaware of how to do it. As a result, many ICAs continue to fear the consequences of this mistake, not filing or incorrectly filing taxes, as they plan to apply for a green card in the future.

Athletic departments are primary entities responsible for ICA recruitment and offer an elite educational experience along with elite athletics. However, they failed to adequately support this population. While some athletic departments offered occasional workshops on resume building, cover letters, career fairs, and social etiquette, these programs were designed for DCAs and failed to address the specific challenges faced by ICAs. This was further compounded by the isolation fostered within athletic department environments and sport-specific schedules. ICAs remained trapped in an "athletic bubble" with limited access to support and guidance, mirroring findings in college sports literature (Finnell, 2022; Fuller, 2014; Smith & Hardin, 2018). This

study expands on existing literature by demonstrating how the isolation created by athletic "bubbles" severely impacts ICAs' overall experience, particularly career preparation. Unable to interact with other ISs and broader campus resources, ICAs find athletic department programs designed for DCAs irrelevant. Participants consistently criticized athletic department staff as lacking an understanding of their unique challenges in the U.S. workforce. Furthermore, participants reported staff made no effort to learn about their needs, resulting in ineffective support programs. Beyond these career guidance concerns, ICAs emphasized the absence of essential financial literacy workshops tailored to their unique situation. These workshops could address the financial uncertainties of navigating a new country, complex visa and immigration paperwork, and the skills needed to thrive in the U.S. workforce as an immigrant. The absence of such programs highlighted a culture of incompetence and ignorance within athletic departments leaving ICAs unprepared and vulnerable as they transition out of athletics. This lack of comprehensive support demonstrated a critical failing on the part of athletic departments, leaving ICAs to navigate a complex landscape without the resources they deserve.

Interestingly, only certain academic departments across campus like business and engineering schools offered their in-house career development specialists to provide individualized support, which proved to be helpful for ICAs. Individualized academic and career navigation support for ICAs, also recommended by Newell (2016), while appreciated by ICAs, displayed how ICAs are not integrated within U.S. HEIs and their programmatic efforts. Institutions lacked inclusive career readiness support methods and programs that had a built-in focus on immigrant student populations that addressed immigrant-specific challenges for this phase of their lives. Again, showcasing how this population continues to be present at HEIs in

abundance but no effort is made to cater to their unique needs even though they remain significant contributors to U.S. HEIs and the U.S. economy.

Extant research (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Bale, 1991; Comeaux, 2019; Lee & Opio, 2011; Manwell et al., 2021; Navarro, 2015; Newell, 2015) has consistently documented the significant time commitment demanded of CAs. This was further supported by the findings of this study, which align with NCAA data (Comeaux, 2019; Wolverton, 2008; NCAA, 2017) indicating that CAs dedicate 35-43 hours per week to athletics commitments. This workload constituted nearly a full-time job, posing a significant challenge for participants as they strived to balance academic pursuits and other personal endeavors. ICAs who wanted to pursue professional development opportunities like networking events on campus or within the community were unable to do so since the priority was supposed to remain on athletics. In fact, engaging in career readiness programs and initiatives, like pursuing summer internships and CPT-authorized work experiences during the semester, was looked down upon by participants' coaches in this study. For those who went against the expectations of their coaches, like Jack and Chief, it left them feeling guilty and fearful of the possibility of losing a spot in the lineup due to missed "voluntary practices" over the summer or not spending those hours practicing instead focusing on one's professional growth. As is well documented in college sports research, this study also showed how as most coaches are incentivized by athletics directors based on championship wins, they forgot their role as mentors and teachers in ICAs' lives. Instead, they pushed ICAs to be great athletes while completely negating the fact that only two percent of all CAs make it to professional sports leagues (Jayakumar & Comeaux, 2016). This approach overlooked the importance of pursuing extracurricular and professional development opportunities. Overall, almost all coaches failed to deliver on their promise of a holistic

experience as mentioned during recruitment and upon admission. This hurt ICAs and their career preparedness and was disheartening to hear considering research suggests coaches are a major factor in ICAs' choices to select a particular school. Such ICA experiences found through this study further aligned with the sport labor migration theoretical framework: ICAs were consistently overworked within athletics spaces, using their body for athletic gain, but not supported in their career preparation efforts (Bale, 1991; Garrett et al., 2020; Holman, 2007; Love & Kim, 2011; Weston, 2006; Zillmer, et al., 2015).

Previous literature suggests academic advisors and CA development staff can positively impact academic and post-college experience for CAs, especially ICAs (Newell, 2015). My findings illustrated academic advisors failed to recognize the unique academic and career-related aspirations of ICAs and prioritized maintaining bare minimum academic standards to remain athletically eligible. Participants' academic major preferences were ignored, and they were forced to pursue majors that aligned with the athletic time demands and the sport-specific schedules created by coaches. A major finding revealed how ICAs learned about STEM versus non-STEM degrees and their impact on their stay in the U.S. during their job search phase. This negatively impacted most ICAs who involuntarily chose non-STEM degrees as they were limited to a one-year OPT as compared to a three-year OPT for STEM degree holders. This finding adds to the ICA-related academic advising literature. Academic advisors should be cognizant of major-specific impact, especially for those aiming to pursue professional careers in the U.S. upon graduation.

Another significant aspect of career readiness within U.S. HEIs remains institutional career fairs. However, due to athletic time demands, CAs including ICAs, were often only able to participate in small-scale career fairs hosted by athletic departments. Findings suggest

athletics-specific career fairs never hosted employers who sponsored immigrant work visas. Also, athletic departments did not make the effort to recruit former ICAs currently in the workforce to be present at these events to help fellow ICAs engage with employers who sponsor visas. This oversight resulted in disappointment and ineffective ICA programming, showing a lack of consideration for this population's unique circumstances when organizing specialized events. Instead, they were exclusionary and ignorant of ICA needs during their rare attempts to support CA career readiness. Essentially, ICAs were viewed as athletic contributors rather than well-rounded students seeking jobs, reinforcing a perception as sport labor migrants rather than future professionals.

Although most entities failed to adequately support ICAs in their career transitions, a couple of bright spots deserve recognition. First, two coaches (Jack's football coach and Azlan's tennis coach) stood out. They prioritized mentoring by facilitating internships and flexible training schedules for career events. This highlights the positive impact of supportive coaches on ICAs' career journeys – a crucial but often lacking element in college sports (Southall & Weiler, 2023). Both Jack and Azlan now have successful careers in New York City, demonstrating the benefits of such support. Second, beyond formal support systems, ICAs relied heavily on their social capital – alumni, senior teammates, professors, fellow international students, and friends. These networks offered invaluable guidance on navigating OPT deadlines, interview preparation, and resume drafting. Independent, motivated, and resourceful ICAs were the most successful. They actively sought mentorship from professional connections and used online resources to navigate their uncertain future. This highlights how ICAs were largely left to fend for themselves, relying on personal networks and self-reliance to address their career needs. The intercollegiate athletics experience, rather than fostering resilience through structure, forced

ICAs to develop these skills on their own. Thus, reiterating how the college athletics experience itself doesn't necessarily equip ICAs with persistence and resilience. Instead, it forces them to develop these skills on their own if they hope to achieve the “American Dream” promised during recruitment.

Overall, this study exposed a critical failure in preparing participating ICAs for life beyond athletics. Structural support systems and dedicated programs were largely absent, leaving ICAs to rely on self-motivation, problem-solving skills, and personal networks built with friends, teammates, and fellow ICAs for guidance in career readiness. These findings highlight the exploitative nature of the system, aligning with Bale's (1991) concept of the “brawn drain.” U.S. HEIs and the NCAA appear to prioritize athletic performance over academic and professional development, extracting highly skilled athletes from around the world and leaving them stranded after graduation (Bale, 1991). Despite the NCAA's marketing of a “student-athlete” model, the reality for ICAs is one of exploitation. U.S. HEIs and the NCAA focus solely on athletics, neglecting career preparation and offering minimal guidance and resources. This lack of support is evident in the participants' own testimonies, where they describe feeling ‘molded’ for athletics with no awareness of future career options.

Discussing Participant Transition Out of Sport – The Job Search Journey

Nearly all participants in the study started to job search right after graduation. Only a couple of ICAs started looking for jobs a year before graduation. Following graduation, out of the 25 total participants, 10 ICAs returned home, while 15 remained in the U.S., navigating diverse challenges like pursuing graduate degrees to extend their stay or securing OPTs, H-1Bs, and L1 work visas. While the previous section highlighted the lack of career readiness resources and support structures, it's important to note that those findings were not the only factors impacting ICAs' workforce transition. This section delves deeper, exploring a critical, yet under-

researched factor impacting ICAs' workforce transition—an extremely challenging job search phase experienced by ICAs.

Existing research explores the job search difficulties faced by ISs in the U.S. or upon returning home (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011; Dahling et al., 2013; Pitre, 2017). However, this study breaks new ground within the ICA literature by specifically examining their job search experiences. In addition to the lack of career readiness, the findings point to several personal and financial challenges, systemic issues at the institutional and national level, and federal immigration policy as factors that impact ICAs' transition out of sport phase. These factors, combined with the inherent challenges of being both a CA and an IS, created a particularly challenging transition period for ICAs in the study.

This study exposed financial insecurity as a major barrier for ICAs during their job search. Most participants lacked savings and struggled to meet basic needs due to a lack of awareness about this transitional phase. Additionally, those on scholarship did not receive any cost of attendance post-graduation. Other than a few participants who either had financial savings or were able to find ways to work 'illegally' and make extra cash on the side by coaching sport-specific lessons and working at bars, most struggled to make ends meet. Unexpected expenses like housing beyond graduation and OPT fees added to their burden. During this time, ICAs with personal support systems like friends, teammates, and extended family in the U.S. were able to live in their houses, sleep on their couches, and eat from their groceries. While participants who returned home relied on family businesses and parental income, they continued to face financial challenges at a personal level. In summary, participants exclaimed it was one of the toughest times of their lives and articulated how education and awareness about such

circumstances well before graduation could have helped them financially save and plan for the uncertain times.

Financial insecurity wasn't the only hurdle ICAs faced during the job search. Like previous research on CAs, including ICAs, this study identified experiences with mental health issues, body image concerns, and eating disorders during career transition (Cormier, 2019; Kerr et al., 2014; Pritchard & Wilson, 2005). However, this study added another layer of complexity suggesting these challenges may be amplified for ICAs due to the additional stress of navigating an unfamiliar culture, an anti-immigrant environment, and an extreme political climate. During the job search phase, many ICAs, especially women and people of color (POC) took into consideration the presence of abusive and exploitative abortion rights, control over education systems and their right to teach about race and sexuality, and gun laws during former President Trump's administration. Additionally, Trump's exclusionary discourse against immigrant populations and their ability to reside in the U.S. exacerbated their job search challenges. Many employers denied hiring immigrants in their workspace by not sponsoring work visas. This discriminatory discourse and anti-immigrant social climate impacted ICA's long-term career-related decision-making process and their mental and emotional health.

Building upon existing research highlighting the competitive nature of the U.S. job market (Savickas, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009), this study identified additional complexities faced by ICAs seeking employment. Visa regulations, immigration policies, and the limited timeframe associated with OPT created significant hurdles beyond the general challenges encountered by job seekers. The 90-day OPT unemployment grace period proved insufficient, particularly considering the social and cultural adjustment challenges faced by ICAs during this transitional phase. The ever-present threat of deportation further exacerbated anxieties and hindered their

ability to focus on job search efforts. U.S. based employers also left participants disappointed. Most of the employers ICAs interacted with openly denied hiring immigrants or showed reluctance to hire this population, confirming previous findings by Stewart (2012). Thus, suggesting while employers and U.S. citizens may benefit from ICAs competing for HEIs/ alma maters to boost athletic competition, they are reluctant to offer them opportunities for post-athletic careers, preferring to conserve American resources for American citizens. These findings align with perspectives echoed by Bale (1991) and Holman (2007) where ICAs and immigrants are viewed as a threat to the domestic populations. Employers not only rejected ICAs directly for job opportunities but also dismissed them based on the need for sponsorship within online applications. These rejections occurred immediately, with applications either not considered or completely ignored by organizational job portals and their hiring managers. This led to a disheartening reality for ICAs seeking their first step on the U.S. career ladder.

Despite frequent rejections faced by ICAs, amongst ICAs who secured jobs, two major interesting themes emerged. First, STEM degrees provided a "specialized skills" advantage. Employers actively sought these skills, viewing STEM graduates as valuable assets in their organizations. Kate, a civil engineering student, secured a job quickly, unlike non-STEM graduates like Nicole, Azlan, John, and others who faced constant rejections due to both citizenship and degree choice. Second, the nationality of ICAs mattered in this process. Citizens from certain countries, particularly those with alternative residency options like Jack (Australian) and Michelle (Canadian), had an advantage during the job search due to their country's specific treaties with the U.S. They did not have to solely rely on the H-1B lottery system. This aligned with existing research related to the impact of occupation and nationality impacting IS job search journeys (Nunes & Arthur, 2013). However, my study adds to the literature by addressing a layer

of interest convergence that exists in this space. ICAs secured employment only when their skills directly benefited the employer, regardless of background. Otherwise, they faced an uphill battle in the job market. This was even true for someone like Chief, a social work degree holder, who, despite his non-STEM degree, was able to leverage his unique background as a Black South African man to his advantage with a social work firm managing African refugees. His specific skill set aligned with the employer's needs, highlighting the importance of both skills and background for some ICAs.

These experiences expose the ever-changing landscape of the ICA job search. A mix of selective practices and exclusionary policies creates a complex and constantly evolving "convenient hiring" maze. This underscores an urgent need for reform. Outdated federal immigration policies remain a major barrier, hindering ICAs from contributing their skills to the U.S. workforce. Equitable practices are essential to provide a fair chance at finding work and building a life in the U.S. This study's findings echo existing research (Sethi et al., 2021; Lee & Opio, 2011) on anti-immigrant policies. Additionally, concerns remain about the exploitation of ISs, particularly those in STEM fields, who are often viewed primarily to benefit the U.S. economy (Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Altbach, 1989; Barber & Morgan, 1987; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The experiences of former DI ICAs in this study mirrored these concerns, aligning with existing research on ISs. Thus, highlighting the need for a system that prioritizes a balance: meeting the needs of employers while respecting the rights of immigrants seeking to contribute their skills and talents.

The preferential treatment of STEM graduates wasn't the only issue. The study found that even non-STEM graduates who secured jobs faced exploitation. Employers, aware of their visa limitations, offered ICAs with one-year OPTs lower salaries and no sponsorship promises,

regardless of performance. This highlights a pattern of mistreating ICAs as expendable labor, not just within athletics but also in the broader workforce. For example, Megha, despite holding a business degree, was offered a salary below minimum wage and chose to return home. However, many participants, particularly POC, from developing regions like countries in Africa, Asia, South America, and regions of the Caribbean, understood limited professional opportunities awaited them back home. This fueled their determination to navigate the challenging U.S. job market despite the obstacles they faced.

Similar to their career readiness journey, social capital proved crucial for ICAs landing jobs in the US. Nearly all participants who secured positions in the U.S. did so through networking (conferences, friends' referrals, etc.). Disappointingly, unlike Foster and Lally's (2021) findings, none of the ICAs in the study received support from athletic department employees, even those who secured sports-related jobs. This highlights the importance and need for ICAs to continue building strong independent social and professional networks to aid career transitions and remain self-motivated and disciplined to maintain these connections. While Foster and Lally (2021) observed athletic department support for sports careers, this study suggests a broader reality: ICAs must be their own advocates on college campuses and in the U.S. job market.

Another interesting finding emerged regarding the participants' educational journeys during the study. Among the 15 ICAs currently residing and working in the U.S., 12 (80%) pursued at least one master's degree while navigating their one-year OPT as non-STEM graduates. Notably, four ICAs (33%) who pursued STEM graduate degrees did not have STEM backgrounds but strategically chose STEM fields for graduate education to capitalize on the extended 3-year OPT benefit. These findings suggested that, by this point in their careers, ICAs

were keenly aware of the existing U.S. immigration policies and the advantages of STEM degrees. This awareness likely influenced their career planning decisions, contrasting with their experiences upon initial arrival in the U.S. for college. Of the remaining three ICAs who did not pursue graduate degrees, two obtained green cards: one through employment and another through means not aligned with immigration regulations (marriage not based on a bona fide relationship). These findings highlight the potential significance of pursuing specialized graduate degrees for ICAs seeking successful careers in the U.S. The dedicated time spent on academics during graduate studies might explain why these ICAs remained in the U.S. This period could have provided a valuable space for them to recover from their athletic careers, refocus on academics, and gain a deeper understanding of the workforce complexities. There is limited research exploring how former athletes navigate the post-playing career transition. Studies suggest that former CAs often experience increased opportunities, autonomy, and overall well-being after leaving collegiate sports environments (Grummert, 2021). This study's findings supported existing literature as most participants were able to plan and act upon their professional endeavors after their athletics career once they got time and space to pursue graduate degrees.

Another major finding revealed the value of a U.S. degree for ICAs returning home varied significantly based on their country of origin. ICAs returning to Asia, South America, and Africa often found their U.S. degrees facilitated employment in their chosen fields. However, for ICAs returning to Europe, North America (excluding the U.S.), and Australia, U.S. degrees carried less weight. These individuals often pursued more higher education or entirely new career paths that diverged from their undergraduate majors. For instance, Megha, upon returning to Denmark, needed a master's degree in business to secure employment, highlighting the

limitations of her U.S. degree in her home country. These findings reinforced results from Foster and Lally (2021) while also revealing the critical role of an ICA's home nation in degree transferability. This emphasizes the need for advisors to consider national identity when supporting ICAs' academic and professional development. A “one-size-fits-all” approach for CAs is insufficient, particularly for the diverse ICA population. Treating them as a homogenous group overlooks their unique needs and potentially reflects a disregard for their well-being beyond athletic performance. Finally, with specific American college degrees that held little weight in participants’ future career aspirations based on location and job type, the lack of degree applicability further supported the study’s theoretical framing. This finding further fuels concerns that ICAs are essentially sport labor migrants since their degrees earned remain of little to no use for professional career growth in some cases, leading to ICAs receiving little in return for their athletic, monetary, and intellectual contributions to U.S. HEIs.

In conclusion, this study reinforced the limitations of the “one size fits all” approach commonly used by athletic departments to support college athletes. It highlighted the negative consequences of this practice for ICAs. Participants expressed significant regret over not being adequately informed about the importance of choosing their own academic majors. Guided primarily by academic advisors focused solely on maintaining eligibility for competition, ICAs largely lacked candid discussions about their career aspirations and future beyond athletics. This resulted in enrollment in majors and courses that often misaligned with their interests and job prospects, both in their home countries and in the U.S. The overwhelming emphasis on athletics along with overbearing expectations from coaches disallowed athletes to prioritize personal and professional development through campus-wide initiatives or summer internships. With a se**v**ere lack of integrative career support from athletics departments and/or the NCAA, ICAs lacked self-

awareness and knowledge about navigating the U.S. workforce. Participants shared the presence of such integrative career support measures seemed like a utopia. Unfair and exclusionary U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) policies and employer preferences often created unnecessary hurdles for ICAs seeking to remain and work in the U.S. after graduation. All these factors severely impacted ICAs in their job transition phase.

Conclusions

My research provides invaluable insight into former DI ICA career readiness and job search experiences. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in ICA literature by focusing on various aspects of this population's career readiness and transition out of sport experience. The study's findings, based on former DI ICA stories, revealed DI ICAs are truly treated as sport labor migrants by U.S. HEIs and their stakeholders. Present across the U.S., participants provided HEIs and athletics departments with several advantages: they are sources of athletic capital and revenue, they heighten chances of winning championships, provide global recognition and branding, and promote institutional reputation on an international scale. ICAs also bring an enhanced sense of diversity, enrich cultural aspects of the campus environment, and continue to be sources of financial capital as "cash cows" pouring into the U.S. economy (Bale, 1991; Holman, 2007; Weston, 2006). In return, they do not receive a fair exchange for their athletic labor and intellectual and cultural contributions. Often, they neither receive a meaningful degree nor a holistic collegiate experience that prepares them for the next phase of their life as professionals in the workforce. Thus, the business model of intercollegiate athletics (Holman, 2007) unethically thrives on the practice of heavily recruiting ICAs for short-term athletic gains, while potentially overlooking their long-term well-being.

This study highlighted a critical deficiency in career support services for ICAs within U.S. HEIs and their stakeholders. ICAs reported a lack of awareness regarding career

opportunities available in the U.S., limited training to prepare them for workforce success, and inadequate guidance from crucial support systems such as academic advisors, coaches, athletic development staff, and international student services (ISS) officers. The lack of roadmaps and support available to ICAs made their career readiness journey extremely challenging. The inability to choose academic career paths upon arrival set the tone for what followed an ICA's academic and professional journey. Academic advisors prioritized maintaining athletic eligibility and failed to educate ICAs about the impact of academic majors on their professional careers. Often, advisors were either uninformed or disregarded the unique challenges ICAs face as immigrants in the job market. Specifically, advisors often failed to discuss the potential impact of STEM versus non-STEM degrees on work visa options for ICAs and the potential challenges of degree transference if returning to their home country. Like academic advisors, coaches failed to consider ICAs post-athletic careers. Coaches remained inflexible with ICA academic schedules and ignored their academic aspirations. Coaches even pressurized ICAs against summer internships and professional engagements in campus-wide events, always prioritizing athletic commitments. While only two percent or less of all CAs make it to professional-level sports (NCAA, 2020), the lack of focus on career preparation initiatives remained appalling. This trend continued with athletic departments that continued to view and treat the ICA population as expendable and confined them within athletic bubbles. Throughout the limited career readiness and professional development programming available at some institutions, distinct national and cultural identities within ICAs were excluded.

Additionally, ISS offices within institutions remained one of the least effective sources of career readiness support, leaving ICAs to navigate nuanced and tricky immigration circumstances alone. They provided bare minimum support in the form of signing off on travel I-

20s and hosting social and cultural events to build the IS community. ISS failed to host ICA-specific career exploration spaces to discuss specific job opportunities in the U.S., inform ICAs about employers who sponsor visas, educate ICAs about work visa options like CPT and OPT, emphasize the importance of work authorization paperwork timelines, share information regarding country-specific tax laws and employment treaties, and raise awareness about nation specific programs to financially support ISs living in the U.S. As a result of such negligence and disheartening lack of career support, ICAs were consistently left uninformed, perpetuating their lack of awareness.

On a broader level, the NCAA failed to provide a holistic college athletics experience and made no efforts to promote ICAs' growth and professional development. The NCAA did not even advocate for equitable ICA rights to engage in NIL, which has the potential to enhance personal and professional growth. The NCAA's sole focus remained on surveillance measures restricting ICAs from competing in professional international competitions. Participants expressed the lack of job prospects within the NCAA and its stance on not sponsoring immigrant visas which is a clear anti-immigrant and exclusionary stance within the national governing body. In the macro sense, this demonstrates how the NCAA, as a nonprofit organization, is inextricably tied to the state (Hextrum, 2021a, 2021b), and works in alignment with immigrant-related federal policies that are often highly restrictive, exploitative, and exclusionary towards labor migrants. These factors all negatively impacted ICA career readiness and transition out of sport journey.

Moving on to the challenges participants faced during their job search phase, it's important to note that the absence of awareness, education, and career readiness programs was coupled with discriminatory and anti-immigrant practices by employers in the U.S. workforce.

Employers at athletic career fairs refused to sponsor immigrant visas. Additionally, outdated, restrictive, and anti-immigrant policies and timelines established by the U.S. federal government, including those set by USCIS, significantly exacerbate job search difficulties. These factors impacted ICAs' ability to continue to stay in the U.S. and forced many to return home. Financial difficulties were a common theme across participant experiences during the job search phase forcing some to engage in illegal employment to make ends meet. Many ICAs also experienced mental health challenges, body image issues, eating disorders, homesickness, loneliness, language barriers, and being at the receiving end of anti-immigrant discourse during the job search phase. Specifically, the 90-day post-completion OPT period awarded by USCIS to all ISs caused immense distress to ICAs. While navigating personal challenges during this time due to an extremely grueling athletic career at U.S. HEIs, they were forced to look for jobs, recover mentally, physically, and emotionally, streamline their immigration paperwork, and even relocate in search of employment. This proved to be one of the most challenging and stressful phases in the lives of ICAs in this study.

ICAs' country of origin impacted their transition out phase. Many ICAs, those from more developed nations with stronger economies (Canada, Spain, Denmark, and Australia) were relatively more selective during the job search and felt the U.S.'s anti-immigrant and conservative political climate more acutely unlike folks from countries in Asia, Africa, and South America who desperately looked for ways to stay in the U.S. in hope of pursuing a better life. They chose to push through the exclusion and bigotry to find a way to live in the U.S. Those from nations in North America, Europe, and Australia, especially those who identified as white, experienced less discriminatory environments. They also had more flexibility due to their nationalities to work and reside in the U.S. for longer durations on different visa categories based

on their nation's treaties with the U.S. government. Thus, the findings revealed that not all ICAs had similar experiences during the job search and transitions out of sport journey. Based on their national identity, some ICAs benefited more than others. Regardless of nationality, ICAs who selected majors deemed more specialized or valuable in the U.S., such as those in STEM fields, often enjoyed a smoother job search experience. Despite employers' anti-immigrant biases, they tended to hire immigrants when their degrees aligned with organizational needs, indicating both interest convergence and exploitative hiring practices towards ICAs. STEM degrees were preferred by employers and the U.S. federal government that granted a 36-month OPT versus a 12-month OPT for non-STEM. Consequently, many ICAs who ended up living and working in the U.S. pursued graduate degrees. Graduate degrees helped ICAs take control of their academic careers and gave them time to engage in career exploration and networking which positively impacted their job search phase. Had ICAs been informed about the advantages of STEM majors in securing job opportunities and extended visas, they might have made more informed undergraduate degree choices.

Despite the perception of U.S. HEIs offering world-class education, ICAs who chose to return home or were compelled to do so due to strict immigration timelines and restrictive policies faced significant challenges transitioning out of sport and into the workforce. Their academic degrees, particularly in countries within North America, Europe, and Australia, lacked value. Consequently, ICAs often had to pursue graduate degrees or additional certifications at home before finding employment. In contrast, those returning to countries in Africa, South America, and Asia could leverage their U.S. degree positively in the workforce. The opportunity to return home provided ICAs with the flexibility to make decisions, recover from their athletic careers, and navigate the job market without visa and immigration complexities. For most ICAs

in this study who remain in the U.S., flexibility was not an option. Reliance on athletic career fairs, which often did not have employers who sponsor visas, left ICAs without building professional networks or securing jobs with event presenters. Like those who returned home, ICAs who stayed in the U.S. relied heavily on personal and social networks, including fellow ICAs, alumni, and mentors, to navigate the U.S. job market. The success of securing a job in the U.S. after such challenges was attributed to their intrinsic motivation, drive for excellence, persistence, problem-solving skills, and resilience.

Today, many ICAs from this study pursue successful careers in the U.S. workforce, including some pursuing leadership positions. However, their challenges related to visas and immigration continue to persist. Beyond the study's findings, data suggests ICAs rely on temporary OPT work permits, hoping to win the annual H-1B lottery (one chance for non-STEM and three for STEM degree holders). Those on OPT for over three years face pressure to secure employer sponsorship for a green card before their visa expires. Returning home after 10 or more years of living in the U.S., a place many now called home, seemed devastating. Marriage or employer sponsorship offers a path to residency, but for most, uncertainty about returning home lingers. Despite residing in the U.S., navigating visas and immigration remains a constant challenge due to the dynamic nature of work visa statuses and ever-changing immigration laws and policies. Therefore, while their transition out of sport might have come to an end, their long-term residency plan and work stability remain uncertain, to say the least.

In conclusion, this study is a valuable addition to ICA, IS, college sports, sport labor migration, and career readiness literature by showcasing ICA experiences specific to career readiness and their transition out of sport, especially the job search phase. Athletic departments and their stakeholders failed to deliver on their promises of a world-class athletic and academic

experience that prepared athletes for life after sport. ICAs were left stranded by those who should have acted as support systems to propel ICA career readiness for the workforce. The lack of structures and roadmaps provided to ICAs further impeded their pursuit of professional goals, confining them within the athletic facilities of U.S. HEIs and creating an environment that is not conducive to professional growth. This situation left ICAs without the necessary understanding and skills to be successful in the workforce. ICAs who did navigate the workforce eventually did so because of their social capital and personal determination. Underserving ICAs holistically only fulfilled the ulterior motives of most athletic departments, coaches, and the NCAA—using ICA bodies as commodities for athletic gain and global recognition in an increasingly global U.S. college sports era. Despite continuous recruitment, ICAs remain pawns in a billion-dollar game and when they are cast aside once their athletic value fades, they receive no support for building post-athletic lives.

Implications and Recommendations

Given the study's findings, there are pragmatic implications for the federal government and USCIS, U.S. based employers, the NCAA, conference offices, U.S. DI HEIs, athletics departments, and current and future ICAs. There are also implications for fellow college sports scholars who continue to do this work with ICAs and/or for those who choose to pursue it in the future. At the most basic level, these individuals and entities should begin to engage in inclusive and integrative practices and policies towards ICAs without treating them as a monolith and outsiders within U.S. HEIs.

NCAA, Conference Offices, Higher Education Institutions, and Athletic Departments

First, the study's findings suggest ICAs should be provided time and space to engage in career readiness and transition out of sport preparation during their college athletic careers. While they played a critical role on their team's lineup and experienced heightened time

demands, they should not be exploited as highly skilled sport laborers in U.S. HEIs. To better ICA career readiness experiences and see them flourish in the workforce, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Holistic Integration: Athletic departments should promote campus resources and encourage ICAs to connect with the broader student body. Additionally, ICAs should be actively invited to participate in career readiness events.
2. Prioritizing Academic Success: Coaches and administrators must prioritize academic pursuits alongside athletics. Efforts should be made to dismantle the "athletic bubble" by providing time and space for ICAs to focus on their studies.
3. Time Management and Accountability: Compliance officers should enforce practice time limitations and hold coaches accountable for excessive training demands. Coaches should be discouraged from pressuring ICAs into attending "voluntary" practices that conflict with professional development opportunities.
4. Incentivize Support Staff: University policies should reward both coaches for athletic success and ICA support staff (academic advisors and CA development staff) for successful implementation of career readiness programs. Support staff should be encouraged to facilitate networking opportunities, explore internship options (CPT), and organize professional development events for ICAs.
5. Targeted Career Development: Develop a dedicated ICA career preparation program with pre- and post-assessments. This program should incentivize both ICA participation and support staff efforts.
6. Strengthen Oversight: Implement checks and balances at conference and NCAA levels to prevent abuse of power by coaches and athletic departments. Train athletic

department staff to manage interactions with coaches who obstruct ICA participation in non-athletic activities.

Second, the study's findings also imply the severe need for ICA-specific career readiness programming. Athletic departments, campus support services, conferences, and the NCAA must urgently address this need by integrating ICAs into existing programs and developing specialized resources for this population. These programs should educate and empower ICAs to explore career options and navigate the complexities of the U.S. workforce. Several recommendations to support the implementation of this work include:

1. Tailored Career Guidance: Athletic departments and career centers should integrate ICA-specific information into existing programs. For example, mock interview sessions should address immigrant status and visa sponsorship alongside traditional interview topics. Additionally, should provide individualized support and access to resources when requested/needed. Including an ICA support/transition coach can be a great first step as well to provide such guidance.
2. Return-Home Support: For ICAs planning to return home, staff should research best practices for job success in their home countries and prepare ICAs accordingly.
3. Visa-Sponsoring Employers: When hosting career fairs, athletic departments and career development specialists should ensure employers who sponsor immigrant work visas are included to meet ICA needs.
4. Internship Opportunities: Educate ICAs about the value of internships for their job search as immigrants, encourage participation in summer or semester-long programs, and provide access to resources/portals that offer these opportunities.

5. Enhanced ISS Services: Expand ISS office programs beyond social events. Educate ICAs about CPT, OPT, work authorization timelines, taxes, and SSN. Provide resources and guidance for navigating these processes. Consider offering free legal consultations with an immigration attorney for complex questions.
6. Collaborative Support: Athletic departments, responsible for ICA recruitment, should understand ICA-specific regulations and circumstances. Foster relationships with the ISS office and career development centers to create collaborative programs that enhance the ICA experience. This collaboration can help dismantle the isolated "athletic bubble" often surrounding ICAs.

Findings also suggest a critical need for investment in dedicated staff specializing in ICA support and career guidance. Former ICAs willing to work in sports, educated about the ICA experience, and looking to support their community can be great candidates. Implications also lead to several other recommendations that athletics departments, conference offices, and the NCAA should introduce to enhance ICA career readiness and make their transition out of sport a less stressful one. Recommendations include:

1. Tailored Approach: The NCAA, conferences, and athletic departments should move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” mentality and recognize the diverse national identities of ICAs when developing resources and programs.
2. Post-Athletic Transition Roadmap: The NCAA or athletic departments should consider creating a comprehensive guide specifically for ICAs. This resource should include a roadmap that will equip ICAs with the knowledge and steps necessary for a smooth transition out of athletics. The guidebook can also include the following:
    a) Professional development and career exploration opportunities on and off campus

b) List of employers offering internship opportunities for immigrants
c) Timelines for work visa applications, renewals, and tax payments
d) Suggested timelines for OPT application and job search initiation

3. Specialized Advisor Training: Academic advisors and CA development specialists should undergo ICA-specific training. This training will enhance their understanding of academic challenges related to degree transfer. Advisors should also be equipped to consider the value and applicability of specific majors in ICAs' home countries and the impact of STEM versus non-STEM degrees on OPT timelines.
4. Academic Freedom and Career Focus: Advisors should empower ICAs to choose majors that align with their career aspirations.
5. ICA-Specific Engagement: The NCAA and athletic departments should host in-person or virtual forums for ICAs. These forums can share employment opportunities for immigrants, raise awareness of potential career paths, offer career readiness workshops and training, and facilitate connections among ICAs facing similar transitions.
6. Building Networks: Athletic departments with limited/no alumni connections should reconnect with former ICAs and further strengthen their alumni relationships. This can create opportunities for current ICAs to build relationships with alumni, and find mentors, potential employers, and lifelong friends.
7. Immigration Legal Support: The NCAA should establish a program to provide ICAs with free immigration legal advice during and after their athletic careers (up to 90 days post-graduation).

8. Extended Support Services: Athletic departments should provide ICAs with access to healthcare, mental health resources, and career development guidance until the end of their 90-day period.
9. Financial Planning Workshops: Campus offices and athletic departments should incorporate financial literacy workshops into ICA programming. These workshops can help ICAs understand financial management, plan for saving and spending throughout their careers, and navigate potential financial hurdles during the 90-day job search period.

U.S. Based Organizations, Employers, and the U.S. Federal Government

This study's data also implies that ICAs encounter an excessive number of anti-immigrant employers when interacting with U.S. based companies during the job search phase. This situation is worsened by restrictive and outdated visa laws and immigration policies that impact their ability to stay in the U.S. Consequently, there is a pressing need in the workforce for inclusive and immigrant-friendly U.S. workforce employers as well as a federal-level reform of visa laws and immigration policies. Recommendations to foster a positive transition out of sport and workforce experiences of ICAs include:

1. Inclusive Hiring Practices: U.S. companies and organizations should conduct workshops for recruiters to promote inclusive hiring practices, combat anti-immigrant bias, and develop and implement immigrant-friendly hiring policies to ensure fair treatment of ICAs.
2. The NCAA's Leadership: The NCAA should lead by example by establishing inclusive hiring practices within its national office to negate the implicit anti-immigrant hiring sentiments. Additionally, the NCAA can advocate for such changes in other

organizations that interact with ISs and ICAs during institutional and athletics-related events.

3. Policy Changes by the U.S. Government: The federal government and USCIS should do the following:

a) Revise F-1 visa policies to allow ICAs to participate in NIL opportunities for career development and brand building. Change in this policy will also provide ISs and ICAs the freedom to engage in career development-related opportunities off campus if they wish to pursue them. For many who struggle financially, a change in this policy will give them an opportunity to earn extra money to cater to their well-being.

b) Increase the OPT grace period (currently 90 days) after graduation to provide ICAs more time to find employment in the U.S. job market.

c) Eliminate the disparity in OPT duration between STEM and non-STEM degrees, granting all graduates 36 months to explore career options. It will also provide ICAs with valuable time to find opportunities to build professional and mentor relationships with supervisors and others in their organization and beyond.

Overall, these policy changes will empower ICAs to earn an income to support themselves during the job search, explore diverse career paths, build professional networks, and secure long-term employment opportunities in the U.S.

International College Athletes

Lastly, while all the above-mentioned policy changes and action items will positively impact ICA career readiness and transition out of sport experiences, the study suggests that the onus to pursue professional careers and navigate this uncharted terrain of the U.S. workforce also

lies on the ICAs. Due to the current lack of support, guidance, and exclusionary and exploitative policies and practices at the national and institutional levels, ICAs should look to take responsibility and ownership of their own academic and professional journey. A few practical recommendations for ICAs include:

1. Self-Ownership of Academic Path: Choose an academic major of choice and make sure it aligns with your career goals and plans for future residence.
2. Immigration Knowledge: Educate themselves about U.S. visa and immigration policies, work authorization timelines, internship/job opportunities, visa work terms, and tax obligations.
3. Network Building: Actively participate in professional development events, classroom activities, career workshops, and mentorship opportunities to learn about navigating the U.S. workforce as an immigrant.

Future Research

Critical research exploring the importance of DI ICA specific career readiness initiatives and their job search journey has not been done before within the college sports and ICA literature. This study has laid the groundwork, due to its explanatory nature, by investigating ICA experiences during their transition out of sport. More specifically, I have done so without grouping all ICAs the same since they are not a monolith—ICAs have distinct experiences in the U.S. based on their national, racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. There were significant differences in ICA experiences based on their nationality in this study. Thus, while pursuing research projects engaging with this population, scholars, particularly those studying ICAs and their experiences, should continue to engage in future research without generalizing ICA experiences and refrain from discussing them as a homogenous group. More broadly, college sports scholars should acknowledge and address the differences that exist between DCAs and

ICAs within their scholarship and refrain from writing and speaking about *all* CAs and their experiences as a monolith.

While this research was exploratory and focused on the nationality aspect of the ICA identity by interacting with former ICAs and using the sport labor migration framework, future work can take a deeper dive using several other theoretical frameworks to study experiences of specific ICA populations based on race, gender, sport, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or academic major to understand their unique needs and challenges. It can also continue to center the sport labor migration framework in ICA specific discussions. Fellow scholars can examine and analyze institutional differences as well as **c**ompare the experiences of ICAs' career readiness and transitions out of sport journeys across different types of institutions (public vs. private, Division I vs. Division II, and Division III). Pursuing studies that uncover mental health challenges faced by ICAs during athletic careers and post-athletic transitions and examining the effectiveness of various interventions in promoting cultural adaptation and mental well-being can be extremely beneficial to further educate and inform athletics and campus stakeholders to support ICA transition.

Ultimately, this study has amplified the experiences of ICAs who feel cheated, unprepared, and exploited by the NCAA, U.S. HEIs, and the U.S. federal government. By giving voice to their experiences and concerns, I hope it influences policymakers, educators, and athletic departments to better support the holistic development and career preparation of ICAs and aspires to pave the way for a future where *all* CAs can thrive both on and off the playing field.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

University of Oklahoma, Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education

Subject Line: Participation in Division 1 International College Athlete Transition Out of Sport Study

Dear [Name of original participant],

Greetings! My name is Simran Kaur Sethi and I am a second year PhD student in the Intercollegiate Athletic Administration program at the University of Oklahoma. I research college sports, international CA (ICAs), and career transitions of ICAs.

The purpose of my dissertation study is to explore the transition out of sport experiences of DI ICAs currently in the workforce in the US or their home countries. Particularly, I am trying to explore and examine DI ICA experiences when they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce. I am contacting you because you are a former ICA and are currently in the workforce. The primary method of this study is semi-structed interviews and I will be conducting these interviews via zoom.

If you choose to participate, your responses will be kept confidential. During the study, you can decline to answer any question(s) and still remain part of the study. You can also withdraw from the study at any time!

If you are interested in participating in the study or learning more, please contact me via email at [redacted] or via my cell phone at [redacted] and we can set up a 90-120 minute interview at your convenience. Also, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding the study. I will be happy to answer any questions or provide you with further details regarding the study.

Thank you for considering this study and I look forward to hearing back from you soon!

All the best,
Simran Kaur Sethi

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment – Text Message/Direct Message Script - This is sent out to friends and colleagues for the recruitment purposes

Hey [Name of original participant],

Greetings! As you know, I am working on my dissertation study that explores the transition out of sport experiences of Division I international CA (ICAs) currently in the workforce in the US or their home countries. Particularly, I am trying to explore and examine DI ICA experiences when they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce. Since you are a former ICA, you would be a great fit for this study, and I would love for you to be able to participate if you would be willing to do so. The primary method of this study is semi-structed interviews and I will be conducting these interviews via zoom.

If you choose to participate, your responses will be kept confidential. During the study, you can decline to answer any question(s) and still remain part of the study. You can also withdraw from the study at any time!

If you are interested in participating in the study or learning more, please contact me via email at [redacted] or via my cell phone at [redacted] and we can set up a 90-120 minute interview at your convenience. Also, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding the study. I will be happy to answer any questions or provide you with further details regarding the study.

Thank you for considering this study and I look forward to hearing back from you soon!

All the best,
Simran Kaur Sethi

Appendix C


CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Recruiting participants for dissertation study exploring international college athlete (ICA) transition out of sport experiences. All former NCAA Division I ICAs currently in the workforce (U.S. or another country) are invited to participate. Especially seeking more ICAs who identify with any of the below categories:
• Black
• Muslim
• Arab
• Residents of the continent of Africa
• Residents of the continent of Asia
If eligible, you will be requested to participate in a 90 – 120 minute zoom interview.
To participate, please contact Simran Kaur Sethi via email [redacted] or via Twitter @SimranKaurSeth1
This study is approved by the IRB - 14052

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Verbal Consent

Thank you for time and willingness to participate. As you know, I am interested in understanding the transition out of sport experiences of DI international CA (ICAs) currently in the workforce in the US or their home countries. Particularly, I am trying to explore and examine DI ICA experiences when they prepare to transition out of sport and enter the workforce. I also aim to understand what makes ICAs transition out of sport unique and different based on background, country or origin, race, ethnicity, and religion, what are the resources available to them when preparing to transition out of sport into the workforce, what roles do stakeholders within athletic departments, universities and national leaders play to support their transition into the workforce and what roles do ICAs personal and cultural background play in their transition into the workforce. The interview should take about an hour and a half. If the questions are general and abstract, you may volunteer any detail you wish. You also have the option of declining to answer – passing on – any of the questions. I will also check in with you during the interview to see if you might want a break. All of your responses will be kept confidential and will not affect your school, sport, or employment benefits or participation.
Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Interview Questions

1. What pseudonym would you like to use for this study?

2. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family
   - Where are you originally from?
   - What is your racial and ethnic identity?
   - How about your gender identity and sexual orientation?
   - Did any of your family members study/work in the US?
     - *If studied*, did they participate in college sports or at a professional level? If so, what did they share with your about these experiences?
     - *If not*, did they ever speak to you about college? How would you describe their view towards education? How would you describe their view towards sports?

3. What role has/does [respective sport] play in your life?

4. How and when did you decide to play a sport in college? Had you ever been to the US before you came to play college athletics? How did you first learn about the opportunity to play sports in the US? What contact did you have with US coaches? How would you characterize the nature of these contacts? How was your experience going through the NCAA eligibility center?

5. Can you describe the recruiting process? Did anyone help you with the recruiting process (i.e. from family members, teachers, a counselor, coaches, etc.)? When did coaches first start contacting you? Were you offered any official visits? How many? If yes, how was that experience did you attend? What do you recall most about these trips to universities?

6. Which university/universities did you compete for? And for which years? How did you select this university?

7. How fluent were you in English when you first arrived as an ICA to the United States?

8. What was adjustment to college in the US like for you? What academic challenges did you face transitioning to school? What athletic challenges did you experience? Did you experience any cultural and social challenges? If yes, How so? Can you think of any examples? Was your culture and religion accepted/celebrated by the team/athletic department/institution? What resources or support systems did you rely upon to overcome these challenges?

9. What are the major challenges for ICAs transitioning out of their sport? Out of school? Out of both? As an ICA, did you feel more or less prepared for your post-college transition than domestic CA/non-athlete students? If so, how so?

10. Please describe your transition out of college athletics. For what reasons did you stop playing elite/college sports? When did this occur? What experiences during this transition have been the most important to you?
    - Did your family influence this decision? How?
    - Did your coaches influence your decision? How?
    - Any other people/factors that influenced your decision?
    - What challenges did you face while concluding your athletic career?
    - How did you feel physically, emotionally, mentally?
    - How do you feel now about your decision?
    - Anything else you would like to share about experience when preparing to transition out of sport?

11. Did you have any financial difficulties during your post-college transition? If so, can you explain? What financial resources have you used during your post-college transition? Where and how have you secured these resources?

12. Did federal, state, NCAA, athletic department, or team rules impact your post-college transition?
    - If "yes" what happened? How did you/do you approach the situation and/or what support systems/resources did you seek along the way?

13. Have you ever experienced rejection from a job/internship/professional opportunity due to your immigration status? What was your experience? What were you told? How did you handle this situation?

14. Please describe your current employment status. Where do you work now? Is your job aligned with the major you studied in college? Is your job aligned with your career goals?

15. **If working in the US** - How did you secure your current employment? What challenges or barriers did you face during the job search? How was the OPT/H1B visa attaining process? Did you experience any challenges during this process at an institutional/national level? Is your employer aware about the sponsorship process? How was experience with the company/organization in order to set up this process?

    If working in home country/another country outside of US – Did you decide to leave the US and work in another country? If so, why? How did you secure your current employment? What challenges or barriers did you face during the job search?? Did you experience any challenges during this process? How do you feel about working in (name of country)?

16. Were there employers who willing to sponsor work visas for internationals?

17. Who were the most impactful individuals within athletic departments and on campus on your professional development journey? How so?

18. How did the athletic department support you in your growth as a student and now as a working professional?
    - What resources were available to you for career development by your team, athletic department, university and/or NCAA?
    - How involved were student-athlete development professionals (such as student-athlete development staff or academic staff) in your student life? Or in your transition out of sport?
    - What resources did you reply upon to finish your time in college, in sport, and transition out?
        - When were you made aware of these resources? How accessible were these resources? How effective were these resources to you?
    - Did the athletic department host a career fair? If so, did they have employers that sponsor H1B visas?

19. Did you attend/engage in any professional development workshops? How beneficial were these workshops? Which ones did you find most beneficial/effective?

20. How informed were you about the programming and workshops NCAA provides for CA getting ready to transition into the workforce?
    - If they know about, how did you find out?
    - What was your experience participating in these workshops?
    - Did you learn any transferable skills? What did you learn that you use in the workplace today?

21. How involved were you on campus with the international student services office?
    - When did you find out about them?
    - What resources were available to you through that office

- How did they help in the immigration/work visa process?

22. What impact did athletic and academic time demands have on your professional growth?

23. As a former ICA, what impact does the college athlete experience have on your current position as a working professional? What value do you believe employers, schools, social systems, etc., place on your college athlete experience?

24. How satisfied are you with your current education and/or career? What excites you about your current position in life? What are you disappointed by? What sorts of support do you receive in your current position? What are you missing?

25. What is your current affiliation with the university? Do you participate in any university-related events or initiatives? Do you feel any connection or responsibility to the institution?

26. What is your definition of a successful post-college transition for an ICA? What is necessary to be ready for the post-college transition? What skills, knowledge, or character traits are needed?
    - What informs your definition? Who shapes this view? How is this definition of success cultivated in school, sports, families, society?

27. How can your institution improve their support towards ICAs and promote a successful transition out of sport?

28. How can states, national governing bodies of sports and federal laws/policies improve their support towards ICAs and promote a successful transition out of sport?

29. If you could start your college experience all over again, what would you do differently for your professional growth? What do you think is important for those just beginning the ICA experience to know? What do you wish you had known before coming to the US as an ICA?

30. Is there anything else you would like to add about anything we have talked about today, or what it is like to be working and living in a foreign country not as a student?

31. Anything else you would like to share with me about yourself?

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences and thoughts. Let me emphasize that your responses will be kept confidential between you and me, the researcher. Your participation has no bearing on your educational, employment, or athletic roles. Results will be presented in such a way that no individual is identifiable. Now that we are done with the interview, do you have any questions you'd like to ask me about this research project? If you want to contact me later, here is my contact information —[redacted]Also, I may need to contact you later for additional questions or clarification. Can I please have your follow-up contact information?

Appendix E

Topical Codebook (Prior to Coding)

Career Readiness/Career Preparation Experiences
Discrimination
ICA Experiences in HEIs
Exploitation
ICA background (refers to social, cultural, economic capital)
ICA Challenges
ICA Specific Support Services
Name, Image, Likeness (NIL)
NCAA
Recruitment Experiences
Role and Impact of stakeholders (USCIS, Federal Government, ISS Office etc.)
Visa and Immigration Policy
Workforce Experiences

Appendix F

Final Codebook

Academic Experiences
- Degree transference
- Lack of support from athletic dept

Adversity>Persistence/Resilience>Triumph
Alumni Connection/Ties with HEI
Assimilation vs Integration
Athletics Specific Experiences
- Athletic time demands
- Pressure to perform

Career Preparation/Career Readiness Experiences
- Anything related to internship
- No budget in athletic dept
- No support

Challenges Specific to ICAs
Coach
College Choice – Important Factors
Covid - 19
Cultural Differences/Difficulties
Pre or Post Athletics Decisions - Based on Sports vs Academics
Discrimination
Exploitation/Sport Labor Migration
- Athletic Talent i.e., highly ranked in country back home; national athletic awards etc.

Former ICA Advice for Current ICA
Friends
Grappling between Going Pro or Not
Great Quotes
ICA Definition of a 'Successful Transition Out of Sport'
ICA Family Background
ICA Athletic Identity
ICA Suggestions for Improvement
ICA Specific Support System/Services/Programming
- By Athletic Dept
- By Campus
- By ISS Office
- No ICA Specific Services/Programming

ICA Unaware/ Unknown to ICAs

Injury
Language Barriers
Position in Line up/on team
Mental health
Mentor
NCAA

- SAAC

Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL)
Nutrition and Food
On Campus Experiences
ICA Positive Experiences
Reasons to Play College Sports

- Blind move
- Low personal/financial means

Recruitment/Pre-College Experience

- National recruiting agency
- No knowledge about college sports in the U.S.
- Official visit
- Pre-college requirements i.e., SAT, NCAA eligibility center etc.

Revenue Sport Specific Experiences
Scholarships
Social Experiences/Differences
Source of Capital

- Back up business/family's plan in home country
- Cultural
- Economic/Financial
- No Sources of Capital/Low Socioeconomic Status
  Social

STEM Degrees/Impact
Taxes, SSN, Driving License etc.
Teammates
Transfer Reasons and Experiences
Transition Out of Sport

- Job search experience

U.S. Image as Perceived by Immigrants
Unique ICA Identities and Background – It's Presence/Impact

- No/Lack of knowledge/concept of race/ethnicity
- Unique/Different things in ICA's home country i.e., academic system, athletic infrastructure etc.

Unsure How to Code – Needs Discussions with Dr. H

Visa Laws and Immigration Policy
Workforce Experiences in the U.S.

- Labor/ overworked/maybe underpaid
- Former ICAs understand current ICA experiences/want to give back

Workforce Experiences Outside U.S.

Appendix G

Positionality Statement

International college athletes (ICAs) are underrepresented within U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) and hold a distinct identity compared to the international student (IS) and college athlete (CA) population due to their institutional contributions associated with elite athletic participation (Lee & Rice, 2007). Current literature about this population is limited and fails to identify the experiences of ICAs when transitioning out of sport and entering the workforce. Often, they are viewed as a homogenous group and expected to assimilate into the athletic and academic culture relatively quickly even without the appropriate amount of institutional support (Lee & Rice, 2007). Thus, this study aims to view ICA experiences, especially those regarding life after sport and entering the workforce, with a critical lens. To do so, I engaged with former ICAs who graduated from NCAA DI member schools to understand and learn about their challenges, struggles, and successes based on their individual differences like country of origin, cultural background, and past academic and athletic experiences.

Education and intercollegiate athletics are a very important aspect of my life. My identity and experiences as a former athletic department graduate assistant, former professional and international college tennis player from India as well as an M.Ed. in Adult and Higher Education with a specialization in intercollegiate athletic administration shape my opinions and beliefs about the intercollegiate athletic experiences of ICAs. I have faced my share of challenges and successes while competing on a varsity sports team and parallelly working on getting an undergraduate degree at a predominantly white institution as a woman of color. Additionally, as an Indian national, I belong to a country where poverty rates are extremely high and not every individual, especially women, get the opportunity to play sports and get a formal education. I

acknowledge my challenges but am also grateful for the privileges and realize not all ICAs share similar advantages like me—getting a full scholarship to compete for the University of Oklahoma's tennis team, having an educated and career-driven mom who introduced me to sports, and education, and having family in the U.S. who supported me through all my transitions—arriving in the U.S., graduating with my bachelors, and starting graduate school, etc. However, even after all the support and guidance I received, there is so much I have learnt and experienced along the way and there is a tremendous amount I continue to learn while navigating what's next for me after graduate school, a path less often traveled by many ICAs and immigrants.

Furthermore, I have shared personal and professional space with a lot of other ICAs during my career as an ICA, which plays a role in my knowledge and perception of experiences of ICAs and the various struggles they face like discrimination, lack of career preparation, visa issues, language barriers, job search rejections due to international status, etc.

Thus, while I do bring personal experiences and knowledge about this topic into this research topic that I hold dear to my heart and believe can make a difference within the realm of intercollegiate athletics for ICA welfare, I do think that my experience was unique, and others might experience their intercollegiate athletics careers very differently. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that differences between each international student and ICA exist (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007) and I believe mine can make an impact in this space where literature and awareness are so limited. I have engaged with CAs quite regularly either at work or otherwise and have also been in their situation recently (2015-2018). Thus, I understand and relate to their current situation to a certain extent. This has helped me in asking specific questions that address the issues I am trying to study as I know the system and organizational

structure within intercollegiate athletics. I am also aware of the DEI issues that ICAs face regularly and the inter-athletic department conversations about employment issues that ICAs face when looking for jobs after graduation. Additionally, being a former ICA has given me the opportunity to form friendships with other ICAs who are participants in this study—accelerating my study's recruitment process. Conversely, I acknowledge that my identity and beliefs about the ICA experience can influence my perception in a biased way when analyzing the themes I yield from my interactions with participants. I am conscious of these potential biases and their chances of occurrence. Importantly, I believe that as a researcher who is also an insider—having lived through this experience myself, my views, suggestions, and opinions hold space throughout this study.