

Reflection:

The Importance of Social Work in Supporting International Student-Athletes

Lauren Terzis

School of Allied Health, Sport and Social Work,
Griffith University

Abstract

This reflection explores the unique challenges faced by international student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Drawing on my personal experience as a former international student-athlete, I discuss the difficulties I encountered and those I observed among peers. I also incorporate my perspective as a social worker and academic to consider how social work could address these challenges. The reflection focuses on cultural, academic, and athletic adjustment, as well as the transition out of sport. These are areas where social workers could provide meaningful support for international student-athletes. I strongly believe that social workers bring significant value to the sporting context and can help international student-athletes navigate cultural challenges, identity shifts, and mental health concerns. This reflection calls for greater attention to the unique experiences of international student-athletes to ensure holistic care and promote growth and development during and beyond their athletic careers.

Keywords: college athletics, international student-athlete, adjustment experiences

Reflection: The Importance of Social Work in Supporting International Student-Athletes

There is an increasing number of international students coming to the United States on scholarships to participate in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports, with approximately 25,000 participating in college athletics in 2022 (NCAA, 2022). The ability to focus on both academic studies and sport is quite rare in many countries, and the unique system in the United States is very appealing to young athletes who hope to continue competing at a high level while earning a degree. As a university student in Australia who was previously competitive at the state and national age level in swimming, I had given up on the possibility of managing my passion for competitive swimming while furthering my education. When I learned about the U.S. college athletic system, where you could balance both sport and academics, I was intrigued and wanted to be part of that experience. Eventually, I secured a full-ride scholarship to a Division I mid-major college in the Midwest.

Coming from Australia and having visited the United States before, I was not particularly nervous about making the trip and beginning my experience as a student-athlete. At the time, I assumed Australia and the United States were quite similar, as they are both Western countries where English is spoken. I thought, “*How much cultural adjustment could there really be?*” On the surface, these two countries may seem relatively similar, but they are indeed culturally quite different. Reflecting on my experience nearly 18 years later, and now as a social worker, I can see many areas where a social worker would have been invaluable for the adjustment, growth, and development of international athletes who move across the world to pursue their sporting dreams. When thinking about my previous experiences as a former international student-athlete, areas where social work support could make a difference include cultural, academic, and athletic adjustment, as well as transitioning out of sport.

Cultural Adjustment

I had completed a year of university in Australia and had seen TV shows and movies depicting U.S. college life, so I assumed the transition would be smooth and had few concerns. While my transition was relatively smooth overall, I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn about the U.S., as it was culturally very different from Australia. Formally, there was an international student office on campus that provided orientation about life at a U.S. college and the cultural differences we might encounter. However, this was only a brief presentation during orientation day, and I do not recall any specific support targeted toward international student-athletes. I also felt somewhat disconnected from the international student office and other international students because of my role as a student-athlete. Most international students were housed together on campus and built connections that way. As a student-athlete, I was placed with other athletes, which made sense and, upon reflection, I appreciated. However, this arrangement meant I did not utilize the resources or support offered by the international student office as much as I could have.

Given that international student-athletes are often encouraged to live with domestic athletes, there needs to be a stronger focus from athletic departments on supporting their transition, especially as the number of international student-athletes continues to grow. Even as a Westerner, I encountered cultural aspects I did not understand or misinterpreted. It can be a nerve-racking and anxiety-inducing experience when you are unaware of cultural norms. I reflect on the challenges of my peers from non-Western countries and what they may face, and how hard the cultural transition must be.

From a social work perspective, the cultural competence of athletic staff is key and can impact the international student-athletes' experience in their adjustment. A dedicated social worker embedded within the athletic department could provide psychoeducation, facilitate cultural orientation tailored to athletes, and offer a safe space to process cultural stressors. Thinking back, what may have been helpful would be a dedicated international student-athlete group that allows connection and understanding of the viewpoints and challenges of other international student-athletes, while also providing peer support. In addition, social workers could also advocate for systemic changes, ensuring that international athletes are not overlooked in their transition and orientation planning.

Academic Adjustment

Although I had completed a year of university in Australia, the U.S. college system was quite different. The academic approach and emphasis on grades required a major adjustment. In Australia, many students aim simply to pass a subject (50%), following the familiar expression, “*P's get degrees.*” This contrasts sharply with the GPA system in U.S. colleges, where eligibility to compete in your sport depends on maintaining high grades. This emphasis positively impacted me, shifting my focus toward excelling academically rather than just passing classes. However, this is of course not the case for all international student-athletes. I also found that the structure of U.S. degree programs presented additional challenges. Students are required to take general education courses, which is quite different from Australia and many other countries, where degrees are shorter and students begin courses related to their major immediately. As a sociology major with a psychology minor, I struggled in classes such as biology, geology, and music, which were subjects that I had little interest in, and thus found academically challenging.

While the academic study center on campus was helpful and supportive, I believe it could have benefited significantly from a dedicated social worker. The study center team focused on keeping student-athletes on task and maintaining a high GPA, offering tutors and resources. However, the focus was primarily academic. Upon reflection, I now think about and question how mental health challenges may impact performance in the classroom and in the sporting arena. I found that this was not adequately addressed by the athletic department, and there was little awareness or discussion of how mental health can impact

student-athletes. Social workers are well positioned and trained to provide preventative measures, as well as holistic support, addressing stress, anxiety, and identity issues that often accompany academic pressure. For athletes with language barriers, this support becomes even more important. Knowing that a social worker was available, as well as the services they could offer, would have been incredibly helpful for many international student-athletes in navigating these academic challenges, as well as any mental health and well-being challenges.

Athletic Adjustment

I experienced several injuries and periods of time when I had to sit out from competition, particularly due to tendonitis in my shoulder. Sitting out of a sporting meet is a devastating experience, as you want to contribute to your team and you have worked so hard to reach this level. Injuries are common, and most athletes I knew faced them during their college careers, so it is not uncommon. While athletic trainers and doctors provided excellent physical care, the emotional impact of injury was often overlooked. I found this to be especially challenging when you are on a full-ride scholarship, as most international students are, and have travelled across the world with expectations to perform. Social workers are trained to understand the broader impact of injuries and how physical health intersects with mental health. Identifying students who are experiencing an injury and linking them with a social worker for extra support could reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, and identity loss that often accompany athletic setbacks.

Transitioning Out of Sport

Retiring from your sport and finishing your college athletic career is a time of intense emotions and transitions. I reflected on this type of loss several years later during my Master of Social Work program, when I wrote about the loss of athlete identity in my *Grief, Death and Dying* class. Losing your identity as an athlete after college is difficult to navigate, and in my experience, I do not think it is discussed enough with student-athletes who are about to make that transition. Looking back, my concerns centered around questions like: *How do you fill the time once devoted to practice and training? How do you manage your weight when you're used to a large calorie intake to fuel workouts, but now you no longer train and burn calories? Who are you if you are not known as "the Aussie swimmer" (your identity on campus)?* Not being prepared for these situations led to poor time management and significant weight gain after my retirement. While I eventually learned from these experiences and was able to get back on track, I can see how a dedicated social worker who could discuss these challenges and provide resources for transitioning out of sport would have allowed me, and others, to be more prepared for life after athletics.


For many international students, this transition also involves returning to their home country or navigating the complex immigration system to extend a visa or apply for a work permit. These are major decisions that carry emotional weight. Returning home means leaving behind the life you have known for the past four years, along with the friendships and bonds formed with teammates, constituting another layer of loss on top of losing the athlete identity. For me, I stayed in the U.S. because I was able to secure a training visa specifically for international students, which eventually led me to pursue a graduate degree in social work. These were significant transition struggles, and now I can clearly see how social workers could help international student-athletes navigate these phases. Social workers can prepare and support international students during these critical transitions by providing counseling, career planning, and referral to immigration resources, ensuring they have the information and emotional support needed to make the best decisions for themselves.

Conclusion

After reflecting on my personal experiences, I realize how critical social work support could be for international student-athletes like myself. All student-athletes experience challenges and having a dedicated social worker within athletic departments would provide an invaluable resource. I know this is starting to happen more widely across college athletic departments, and I am pleased to see the incorporation of social workers in sport and college athletics. I am passionate about the care of international student-athletes because of my own experience and the unique identity challenges they face. This has inspired previous work on the topic (Terzis, 2022), which provides a synthesis of adjustment experiences for international student-athlete experiences. I acknowledge my experience is different from many other international students, given my privilege of being White-passing and from a Western country, with English as my first language. Despite this, there were still struggles in adap-

tation and transition to U.S. college athletics, and I often think about how much more support those from a different background may need to be able to thrive and perform well both academically and athletically while under immense pressure. Most importantly, I want social workers in sport to consider how they can tailor their approaches when working specifically with international student-athletes, as they face many unique cultural challenges and can benefit from individualized support.

Author ORCID ID

Lauren Terzis  0000-0002-1944-2939

References

- Terzis, L., & Beasley, L. (2023). International student-athletes' psychological and sociocultural adjustment experiences: A qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis. *Advances in Social Work, 22*(3), 1116–1140. <https://doi.org/10.18060/26266>
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2022). International student-athletes. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2022/7/13/international-inclusion.aspx>