# An Examination of the Assimilative and Anti-Immigrant Policies, Practices, and Cultures that Harm International College Athletes in the United States

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*Abstract:* International college athletes (ICAs) are distinct from other international students because of the demands of elite intercollegiate athletic participation. Institutional practices inaccurately position ICAs as a homogenous group with similar needs and frequently utilize assimilation methods when providing support. We engage with integration and assimilation as theoretical frameworks to reveal how these approaches disrupt ICA's college experiences. In reviewing existing literature, we consider how contemporary National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) policies, higher education institution (HEI) practices, and athletic department cultures impose assimilation on ICAs while extracting their athletic talents. We found that assimilation is normalized in the NCAA's amateur rules, in HEIs and their academic policies and practices, and in athletic departments. Throughout the article, we discuss how assimilation harms ICA's athletic and academic achievement. We conclude with suggestions for the NCAA and its member institutions to adopt integrative policies and practices.

*Keywords*: International college athletes (ICAs), integration, assimilation, whiteness, school/sport conflicts

## An Examination of the Assimilative and Anti-Immigrant Policies, Practices, and Cultures that Harm International College Athletes

International college athletes (ICAs)[1] are a unique student population in United States (U.S.) higher education institutions (HEIs). Along with attending school full-time, ICAs compete in varsity sports programs (Hong, 2018). Oftentimes, ICAs cannot simultaneously play elite sports and attend college in their home countries (Bale, 1991; Popp et al., 2009). ICAs are also attracted to U.S. HEIs' top-notch athletic facilities, coaching standards, sports medicine, and scholarship opportunities (Bale, 1987; Hong, 2018). NCAA sports lure ICAs to leave their families, cultures, and home countries to pursue a holistic collegiate experience in the U.S. (Pierce et al., 2012).

From 1980 to 2017, international students at HEIs in the U.S. have tripled – growing from 305,000 to over a million (Bound et al., 2021). International student enrollment has remained

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

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above one million and is predicted to increase – even amid the global COVID-19 pandemic (Bound et al., 2021). ICA enrollment has outpaced international student enrollment. In 1999, only 3,515 ICAs competed for NCAA Division I institutions, i.e., the most competitive college sport division. By 2016, there were 19,500 ICAs across DI institutions (NCAA, 2021a). Today, over 25,000 ICAs make up 13% of the entire college athlete population and compete at NCAA member institutions (NCAA, 2021a). Despite growing ICA enrollment, few researchers study ICAs. The few existing studies explore ICAs' academic and athletic challenges and unique mental health issues arising from culture shock, language barriers, and homesickness (Lee & Opio, 2011; Pericak et al., 2023; Popp et al., 2009; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Sato et al., 2018; Sethi et al., 2022; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Research indicates that ICAs face distinct institutional challenges compared to domestic college athletes and non-athlete international students.

Researchers and practitioners often present ICAs as a monolithic group – assuming *all* ICAs experience the *same* struggles within U.S. HEIs. As a result, studies rarely examine the diversity *within* ICAs[2]. By erasing in-group differences, researchers misrecognize the range of identities, cultures, and origin countries within ICAs. Researchers also evade the institutional assimilative and discriminatory practices ICAs face when navigating campus life. Assimilation is unidimensional and compels underrepresented groups to forgo their identity to adapt to the host culture (Kramer, 2009; Tierney, 1992). Institutional assimilative processes and expectations include requiring ICAs to speak English, eat American food, and adapt to American teaching styles – all of which may conflict with and erase ICAs' cultural and social identities (Lee & Rice, 2007). Researchers have yet to study how the linguistically, racially, ethnically, culturally, and nationally diverse ICA population experiences these assimilative practices.

This conceptual piece explores existing studies on domestic college athletes, international students, and ICAs to discuss the multifaceted and diverse challenges ICAs face when encountering assimilation. We employ assimilation and integration frameworks (Gordon, 1964; Klarenbeek, 2021; Tierney, 1992; Yao, 2015) to discuss ICAs' transitional and on-campus experiences. We also incorporate unique data from the NCAA's Office of Research to examine the ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity among ICAs.[3] In doing so, we identify how athletic departments expect unidimensional behavioral changes and force ICAs to conform to U.S. culture. Lastly, we suggest how U.S. HEIs can adopt integrative policies and practices to enhance ICA's mental health, sense of belonging, and connection to their home countries.

## Frameworks: Assimilation and Integration

Assimilation stems from the Latin word *simulare* or "to make similar." It assumes one person or group must change in response to another's expectations (Kramer, 2009). Assimilation reflects power relationships as the incoming group must accept the existing group's culture (Gordon, 1964). During assimilation, the incoming group – often underrepresented in national demographics – relinquishes their cultural and linguistic practices and submerges into the host nation's norms (Tierney, 1992; Yao, 2015). Assimilation requires no change or accommodation

[2] Jenny Lee's research (e.g., Lee, 2007; Lee & Opio, 2011), discussed in forthcoming sections, offers a notable exception to this trend.

[3] The NCAA does not collect data on ICAs by race. We use country of origin to discuss potential racial, cultural, and ethnic differences among ICAs.

by the dominant group and "imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity" (Alba & Nee, 1997, p. 827). Through assimilation, underrepresented groups can lose their identity, language, and cultural affiliation (Alba & Nee, 1997). The goal of assimilation is to blend "formerly distinguishable ethnocultural groups…into one indistinguishable group" (Rumbaut, 2015, p. 82).

Furthermore, assimilation is ideological or reflects an ideal and norm that is often out of reach for underrepresented groups. American assimilation functions as an ideal and justification for "state-imposed policies aimed at the eradication of minority cultures" (Rumbaut, 2015, p. 82). Dominant groups uphold arbitrary standards of when and how someone can assimilate, often blaming immigrants for their inability to reach these ever-shifting standards (Tierney, 1992). Oftentimes, minority groups can achieve benchmarks of assimilation and yet remain subordinated and "othered" or "regarded as in some sense a stranger, a representative of an alien race" (Rumbaut, 2015, p. 83). Such perceived failures to assimilate say more about the host country, the privileged group, and the HEI than about the minority groups (Tierney, 1992).

As discussed throughout this article, U.S. anti-immigrant rhetoric, discrimination, and policies espouse assimilation to a white, Western norm that most immigrants can never reach due to their ethnic, racial, cultural, and national affiliations. Higher education extends anti-immigrant discrimination in school-specific contexts by recruiting international students to improve their institutional reputations yet withholds these students the proper support to receive an adequate education (Lee, 2017). Similarly, the NCAA and HEIs recruit ICAs for their athletic capital, economic gain, and global reputation (Bale, 1991). Many ICAs can never assimilate (nor desire to) and, as a result, are targeted for their language, ethnic, cultural, or national differences (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007).

In contrast, integration is a mutual adjustment between the incoming group and the host nation (Klarenbeek, 2021). Integration asks both the immigrant and the host to mutually adapt (Klarenbeek, 2021). While these terms are often used interchangeably and with "great imprecision" (Hutnik, 1986, p. 151), assimilation requires no change by the dominant group, whereas integration expects the dominant group to learn from and accommodate the minority group (Hutnik, 1986). Integration models strive for cultural synergy to ensure the minority group feels comfortable in an unfamiliar environment (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Olmedo, 1979). Therefore, integrative policies are considered "a dynamic process that retains the connotation of individuality" and promote cultural harmony and diversity among communities (Lalami, 2017, para 2).

While the integration of immigrants should be a mutual effort, in practice, integration is asymmetrical due to greater levels of adjustments required by those arriving in a new country (Rumbaut, 2015). Such asymmetries should lead host nations to take on greater responsibility to support immigrants, including proactive policies that "promote equality between the immigrants and the existing population" (Rumbaut, 2015, p. 29) and "promote the naturalization of immigrants and thus their full legal integration" (Carens, 2005, p. 40). Yet the U.S. extends asymmetries across immigrant and native groups by upholding restrictive and exclusionary immigration policies and withholding proper support systems to integrate. Integrative practices begin with the receiving society's "respect[ing] the cultural identities and commitments that immigrants want to maintain"

(Carens, 2005, p. 46). This requires "abolish[ing] even the symbolic opposition to dual citizenship" (Carens, 2005, p. 40). Next, host nations must adopt policies that appreciate the differences and similarities between individuals and nations and enhance the experience of immigrants like ICAs to improve educational, athletic, and civic outcomes in the U.S.

## U.S. Nationalism, Assimilation, and Sport

U.S. nation-building policies and nationalistic ideologies historically and presently embrace assimilation (Gardner, 2009; King, 2000; Skiba, 2012). Nation-building grants each state the power to define a nation's origin story, citizenship criteria, and features that unite one nation against others (Gems, 2000). While the U.S.'s national origin story often (falsely) positions itself as a pluralistic, meritocratic, and diverse nation, the country was founded upon removing property and personhood rights from indigenous and African peoples, women, and non-property-owning white men (King, 2000; Mills, 2003). The late 19th century saw increasing immigration from Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe to the U.S. (King, 2000). Such changes evoked a nativist and eugenicist movement, culminating in the first race-based immigration restrictions (Gardner, 2009; Skiba, 2012). These policies favored immigrants from English-speaking, northern European countries, drastically reshaping the eventual U.S. demographics (King, 2000).

Sport emerged in the late 19th century as a potent vehicle for nationalism and assimilation (Gems, 2000). The Playground Movement – a group of educational reformers advocating for the incorporation of physical education and interscholastic sports into schools – argued that athletics were more effective than academic curricula in unifying a fractured American populous into white, Protestant, and capitalist values (Crawford, 2008; Gems, 2000; Miracle & Rees, 1994). Values like individualism, victory, success, and upward mobility were cultivated as inherent to sport and whiteness/Protestantism/capitalism (Crawford, 2008; Miracle & Rees, 1994). Colleges soon became the domain of spectacle sports, transmitting assimilationist and nationalistic ideologies on a larger scale (Gems, 2000; Miracle & Rees, 1994). Spectacle sports like football drew large crowds and promised to bring success and prestige to the school and community (Bale, 1991). Such events opened sport up to non-college-going Americans, offering them a chance to participate in collegiate life (Oriard, 2005).

College football's 20th century rise solidified U.S. nationalism and enabled global expansion. The "symbols, rituals, and meanings inherent in the game resulted in a clear definition of the U.S. as an aggressive commercial, patriarchal culture ready to promote its ideals on the world stage" (Gems, 2000, p. 7). During the Cold War, college sports were vital to producing and disseminating an *American way of life* domestically and abroad to combat communism (Crawford, 2008). Sporting events united and displayed an amalgam of cultural ideas, such as freedom, capitalism, and individualism, that were amplified through university marketing efforts, government propaganda, and consumerism (Crawford, 2008).

College sports remain potent engines for nationalism in the 21st century. College sporting events ritualized the national anthem and embraced military symbolism after the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001 (Ternes, 2016). Such rituals foster community and help groups recover and unite during times of strife (Butterworth, 2008). But they also cultivate attitudes of American exceptionalism (Allison, 2000) and imbue pro-American values in the rituals associated with sporting events

(Knoester & Davis, 2021). For instance, Ternes (2016) found the rise of military symbols in college sports post-9/11 "reinvigorated the primacy of white masculinity as the truest form of patriotism and cast all those outside of the traditional hegemony as potential threats to American life" (p. 279). Importantly, not all athletes who perform the rituals of nationalism neatly align with the hegemonic definition of American identity, i.e., white, cis-male, heterosexual. Yet their athletic performance is often packaged and consumed in ways that attempt to minimize these contradictions and amplify nationalistic sentiment (Knoester & Davis, 2021; Ternes, 2016).

Colleges have long recruited ICAs to boost their programs and telegraph nationalism (Bale, 1991). Oftentimes, colleges resolve the tension of ICAs as "foreign" athletes promoting American universities by enforcing assimilation. ICAs' presence in American universities emerged on a large scale following World War II (Bale, 1991). The mid-20th century saw a rise in globalism which expanded sport markets and talent pipelines (Maguire, 2004; Thibault, 2009). Simultaneously, the NCAA loosened its amateurism and eligibility policies permitting recruitment and athletic scholarships (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Combined, these changes permitted colleges to look beyond their local communities for top talent. Low-ranked universities recruited internationally to boost their programs, especially in sports like golf, tennis, and track & field (Bale, 1991). Such practices increased in the 21st century and expanded into revenue-generating sports like football and basketball (Associated Press, 2020; Auerbach, 2014). Bale (1991) deemed this phenomenon a *brawn drain* in which developed nations (like the U.S.) steal talent from lesser-developed nations, exacerbating global inequalities. Bale (1991) also noted that the brawn drain utilizes assimilationist practices by requiring ICAs to adopt American education, social, and cultural norms, and by favoring athletes from predominately white nations.

In reviewing existing literature, we found little evidence of HEIs embracing integrationist policies and practices when recruiting and supporting ICAs. In the remainder of the article, we consider how contemporary NCAA policies, HEI practices, and athletic department cultures impose assimilation on ICAs while extracting their athletic talents. We found that assimilation is normalized in NCAA's amateur rules, in HEIs and their academic policies and practices, and in athletic departments. We discuss how assimilation harms ICA's athletic and academic achievement. We conclude with suggestions for the NCAA and its member institutions to adopt integrative policies and practices.

## Minorities in U.S. Higher Education: ICAs in College Sports

Tracing the existence of assimilative policies and practices requires first, establishing the dominant group and its corresponding cultures, norms, and values. Next, researchers identify the group subjected to assimilation. As previously discussed, the U.S. and its HEIs corresponding sporting organizations institute whiteness, masculinity, and capitalism as their normed subject positions that value competition, hierarchy, and winning. By virtue of their population size and international status, ICAs are a small proportion of students in HEIs. ICAs make up 13% of the total college athletes at DI and DII schools (NCAA, 2021a).[4] Yet numerical underrepresentation alone does not subject a group to assimilation. Instead, ICA's ethnic, national, racial, and linguistic diversity position them as "foreigners" occupying a lesser status and subject to discriminatory

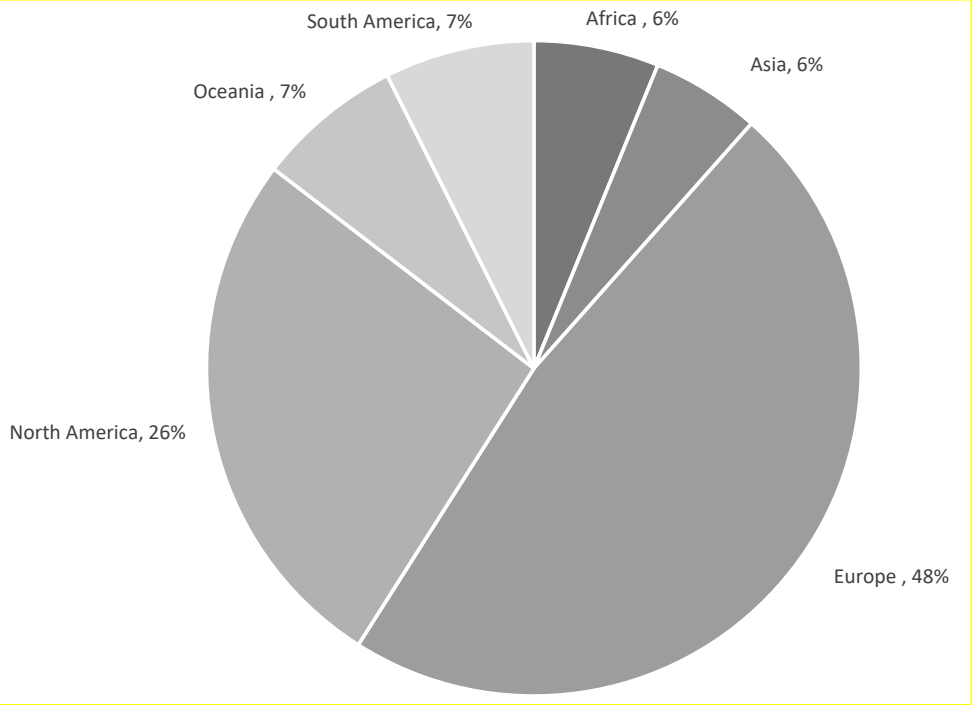
[4] The NCAA does not collect data on DIII ICAs since their applications do not go through the NCAA eligibility center.

treatment (Lee & Rice, 2007). The lack of public data and data collection methods obscures the composition of the ICA population. The NCAA labels all ICAs as "non-resident aliens" and does not disaggregate by race and/or national origin. This data collection strategy communicates that ICAs are a monolithic group and that their race and ethnicity are irrelevant. As a result, researchers extrapolate racial identity through country demographics – an imperfect strategy. Here, we review available NCAA (2021a) data on ICAs to determine trends in country of origin.

Nearly 75% of ICAs are from North America or Europe (see Figure 1). Although representing 85% of the world's population (Worldometer, 2021), ICAs from Asian, South American, Oceanic, and African countries comprise only 26% of ICAs (see Figure 1). Within continents, certain countries are overrepresented. Only 10 countries represent 56% of all ICAs, with the majority, i.e., one in five, from Canada (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of ICAs based on continent of origin*




ICAs from English-speaking countries consist of 40% of the entire ICA population but continue to be overrepresented. However, those from regions where English is not commonly spoken (Asia, South America, and Africa) are vastly underrepresented even though they make up 60% of the ICA population present at NCAA member institutions (see Figure 3). ICAs from underrepresented countries likely face unique challenges that need support and accommodation.

**Figure 2**

*Top 10 countries' college athlete representation at NCAA member institutions*

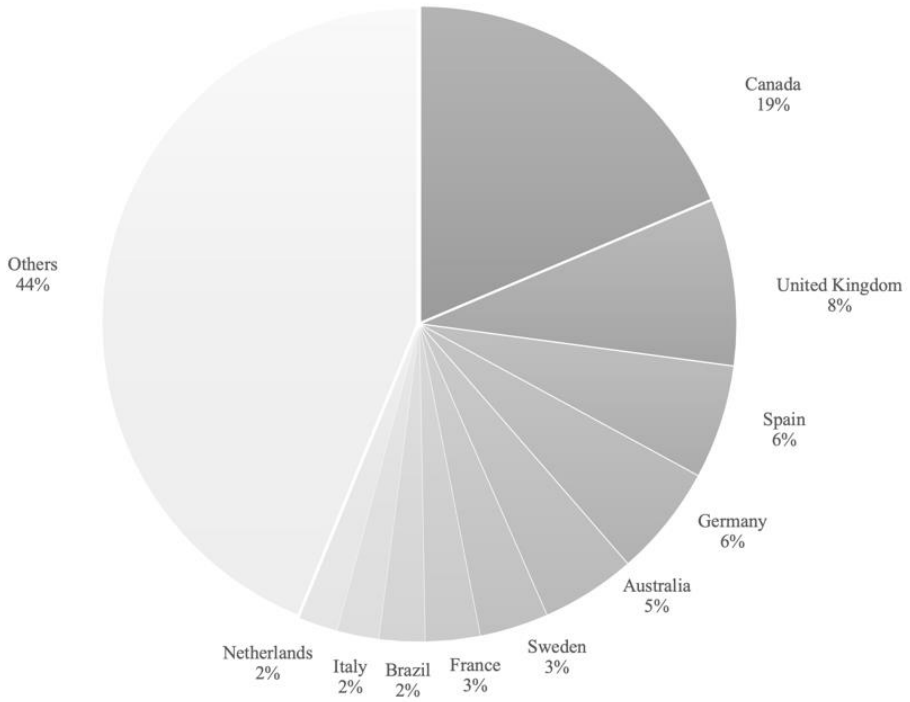
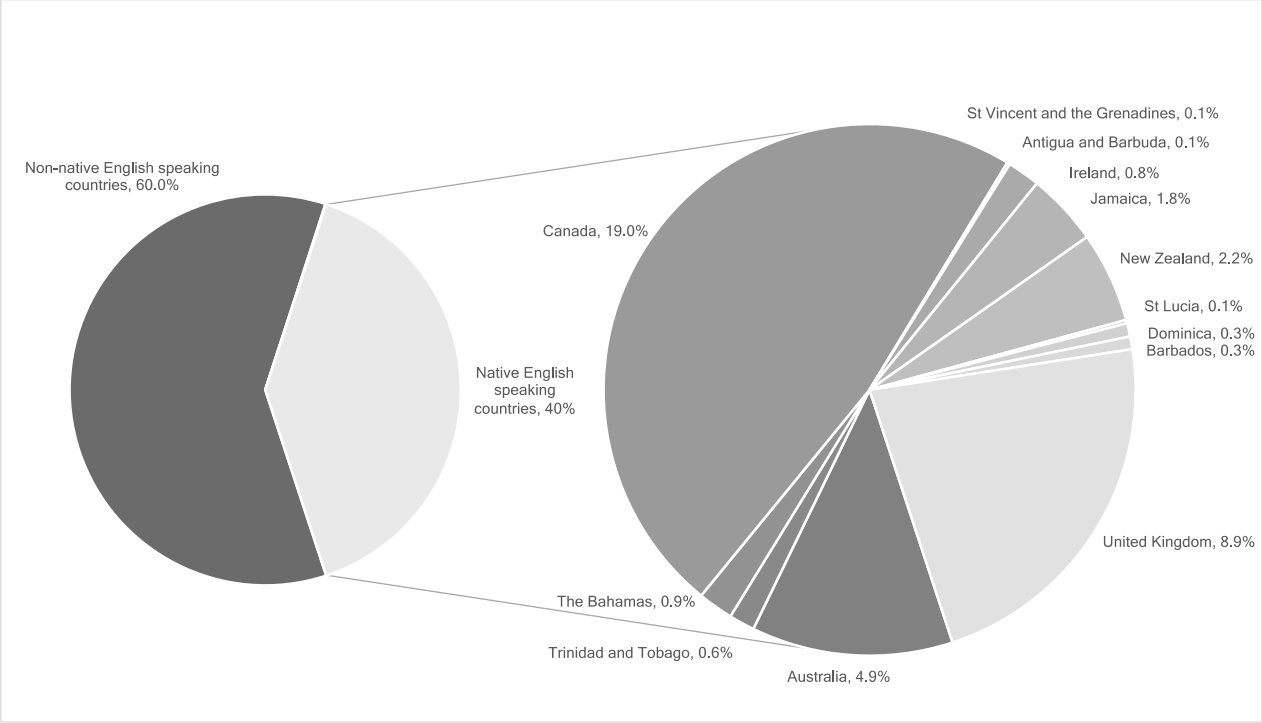



**Figure 3**

*Percentage of native English-speaking countries and breakdown of countries*

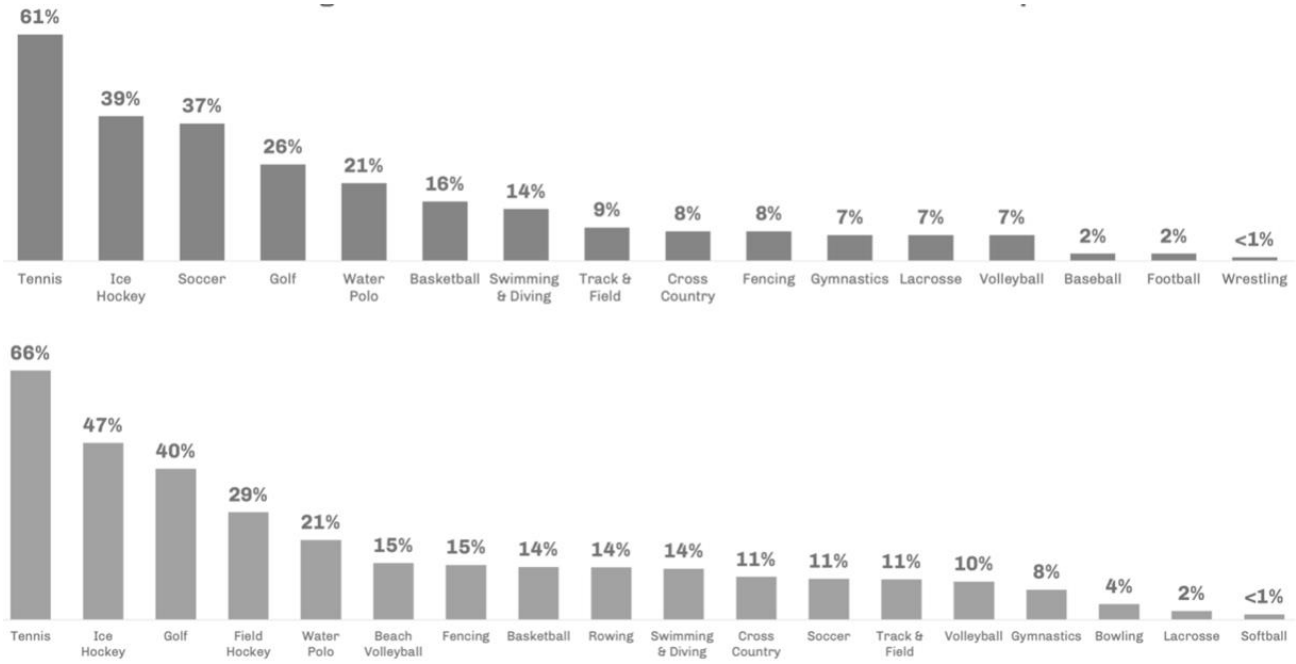



While ICAs represent only 13% of the entire college athlete population within the NCAA, global sports like tennis, soccer, and skiing have large ICA enrollments (see Figure 4). For example, over

60% of DI men's and women's tennis players are ICAs. This shows how a relatively small population of ICAs compromises the majority of participants in certain sports.

**Figure 4**

*NCAA DI men (top) and women (bottom) sports with the highest percent of ICA population*




The overrepresentation of European and Canadian athletes suggests that most ICAs are white. It also suggests that athletic recruitment practices may reflect and amplify long-standing U.S. immigration practices that favor *assimilable* immigrants, or those from white-dominant, English-speaking nations. As we discuss later in the paper, white ICAs experience assimilation differently than those identifying – or who upon their arrival are positioned in the U.S. racial context – as Athletes of Color. ICAs must quickly adapt to a U.S. sports culture that centers on white, masculine norms, requiring People of Color and/or women to assimilate into white supremacist and patriarchal cultures (Hextrum, 2020a; 2021a; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). As a result, not all U.S. citizens share equal benefits and privileges while competing in intercollegiate athletics (Hextrum & Sethi, 2021). Domestic Black athletes are stereotyped as athletically superior and academically inferior to their white peers (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). They also face racial exploitation and discrimination (Beamon, 2014; Coakley, 2015; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Researchers find that academic support units hold lower academic and career expectations for Black college athletes, and, as a result, more often cluster them into easier classes and majors (Beamon, 2014; Fountain & Finley, 2009).

Domestic women athletes also face unique challenges as they are assimilated into a male model of athletics (Hextrum & Sethi, 2021). Women athletes are more often subjected to beauty and appearance standards that align with whiteness and femininity while playing sport (Hanson, 2012). Women and their fans are also assimilated into believing that women are athletically inferior to men (Hanson, 2012). Women of Color are underrepresented and under-studied in

intercollegiate athletics. The limited research has found Women of Color experience sexism and racism within and outside of athletic settings that cause emotional and psychological stresses not experienced by their white peers (Hall, 2001). The dearth of role models for Women of Color Athletes further decreases their chances of aspiring toward professional roles in sport (Hall, 2001; Person et al., 2001). Many ICAs of Color, those who identify as women, and those who do not conform to the gender binary may be unaware of the specificities of American racism and sexism. How ICAs experience and adjust to U.S. power structures remains under-researched. Understanding how the intersections of racism, sexism, and nationalism impact ICAs is a needed first step to providing proper support for this student group.

## Amateurism as Assimilation

### NCAA Regulations

The unique U.S. intercollegiate athletics model attracts athletes from all over the world whose higher education systems do not host elite sports programs (Kaburakis, 2007). To be eligible to compete for U.S. HEIs, elite athletes forgo any professional affiliations or opportunities to reach NCAA amateurism standards (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Amateurism itself reflects assimilation as a unidirectional form of adjustment in which incoming athletes must abide by all NCAA regulations with no room for negotiation or adaption by the host institution. While the NCAA has begun to modify amateur regulations – permitting *most* college athletes to receive some compensation for their name, images, and likeness (NIL) – the original amateur ideal, a white gentleman who plays sport for pleasure, not for profit, remains institutionalized (Hextrum, 2021a).

The NCAA requires complete adoption and obedience to this norm, permitting athletes little freedom to negotiate or digress from the regulations (Hextrum, 2021a; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). For instance, amateur regulations limit how much money college athletes can receive to pay for travel between their homes and campus (NCAA, 2021c). If athletes receive money beyond these limits, they face NCAA sanctions and punishments, including losing their athletic eligibility. This rule assumes athletes have the time and money to travel home during holidays and off-seasons, thus harming lower-income athletes and ICAs who live far from campus.

The NCAA also promotes assimilation more tacitly, as all their regulations and guidelines are published and disseminated in English. To certify their eligibility, ICAs must read, review, and sign materials that may not be in their native language. Upon arriving at athletic departments, ICAs must also complete all the required compliance and admissions paperwork, which is also in English only. ICAs are rarely provided with a translator or translation service to help them understand the documents they must sign. ICAs also have *additional* paperwork – immigration and visa documentation – not required of domestic athletes that is English-only. Monolingualism is assimilationist, requiring those from non-English speaking countries to adapt to America's English-centric norms.

The NCAA amateurism policy also separates ICAs from other international students. Two agencies, Designated School Officials (DSOs) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), monitor international students' compliance with visa laws. These agencies monitor over a million international students in the U.S. and cannot scrutinize all actions (Sethi et al., 2022). In

contrast, ICAs are surveilled by another bureaucracy – the NCAA – which requires athletes to document any forms of employment or earnings and monitor their engagement with fans, donors, and stakeholders (NCAA, 2021c).

Furthermore, ICAs are excluded from recent changes to NIL (Newell & Sethi, 2023; Sethi et al., 2022). ICAs receive F1 student visas, a status that prohibits F1 visa holders from earning any form of active income while studying in the U.S. (Sethi et al., 2022). F1 visa holders can work on campus for up to 20 hours a week during the academic year but cannot work off campus or engage in additional employment opportunities that provide financial compensation (USCIS, 2020). In contrast, domestic athletes are free to work in the U.S. and face no federal employment restrictions. Any restrictions on domestic athlete employment have traditionally come through the NCAA (Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). New NIL rules restrict *pay for play*, which prevents athletes from earning money directly for their athletic talents (NCAA, 2021b). As the NCAA has lightened restrictions on athlete compensation, domestic athletes can now build their brands and earning potential through advertisement, public appearance, contractual endorsement, autograph signing, social media promotions, or any other action that could lead to potential sources of income (Sethi et al., 2022). Yet, the combination of NCAA prohibitions of athlete employment and federal restrictions on international student employment effectively lock ICAs out of NIL. If ICAs monetize their NIL on U.S. land, they risk violating immigration policies and could face deportation (Sethi et al., 2022).

The NCAA and its member institutions have offered scarce guidance for ICAs to navigate conflicts between NIL and immigration laws. Instead, ICAs have been directed to consult immigration attorneys (Sethi et al., 2022). U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and ICE have remained largely silent, creating further uncertainty for ICAs. With this uncertainty, ICAs are forgoing NIL opportunities (Sethi et al., 2022). As a result, ICAs cannot profit off their athletic talents in ways domestic athletes now can – a policy change meant to reconcile long-standing economic and racial inequities in intercollegiate athletics.

## ICA Athletic Recruitment

Many ICAs learn about NCAA amateurism for the first time during their recruitment (Kaburakis, 2007). During recruitment, some learn they have unwittingly violated amateurism, as their home countries have different athletic and academic standards (Kaburakis, 2007). NCAA amateur regulations conflict with international pipelines of youth sport access, where it is common for youth athletes to receive subsidies and prize monies when competing (Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005). These conflicting standards can exclude many ICAs from competing on U.S. amateur athletic teams (Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005). Prospective ICAs receive little support when navigating the differing and conflicting NCAA eligibility standards (Kaburakis & Solomon, 2005).

If a prospective ICA overcomes the myriad barriers listed above, their recruitment process unfolds differently than domestic athletes. ICAs rarely visit college campuses prior to signing national letters of intent, accepting scholarships, or enrolling in the university (Hextrum, 2017; Kaburakis, 2007). In contrast, domestic athletes often take multiple campus visits, meet with coaches and future teammates in person, and sometimes even attend week-long camps to acclimate to the athletic program (Hextrum, 2021a). Such differences in recruitment exacerbate the

transitional challenges for ICAs and openly display how college admissions and college athlete recruitment is not a meritocracy (Hextrum, 2017; 2021a).

Coaches may also interact differently with international recruits by setting unrealistic academic expectations. In persuading ICAs to leave their home countries, coaches emphasize that the U.S. is the only country that combines elite athletics and academics (Bale, 1991; Kaburakis, 2007). Yet coaches rarely discuss how U.S. HEIs might not provide the skills, training, or credentials that translate into an ICA's home country's employment market (Newell, 2015). ICAs might have to complete additional education – in some cases, repeat college – to enter their chosen profession in their home country. These expectations are not explicitly communicated during recruitment but become clear to ICAs once they arrive on campus (Newell, 2015). Such practices reflect assimilation; coaches remain unaware of degree pathways outside the U.S. and assume American HEIs provide the best educational pathways.

Sethi et al. (2022) found that assimilation is "so engrained in the NCAA, members often frame it as a positive" during recruitment (p. 87). As one example, the National Academic Advising Association (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 athletes would be a better *fit* for U.S. college teams.

NCAA policies and practices, especially amateurism, require ICAs to assimilate to a U.S. athletic model. This athletic model (re)produces a global athletic extraction system that funnels toward U.S. institutions. ICAs are seen as institution builders who can improve an HEI's revenue and reputation. ICAs do not receive proper guidance or support as to the true cost of signing with a U.S. DI school.

## Game Time: Assimilation within U.S. Intercollegiate Athletics

### Anti-Immigrant Discrimination in College Sports

Jenny Lee's research is the most comprehensive to date, exploring how various forms of racism that are endemic to higher education impact international students (Lee & Opio 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Utilizing the framework of *neo-racism*, she argued that international Students of Color face compounding forms of discrimination based on their skin color, cultural practices, national origin, language, speech patterns, and religion (Lee & Rice, 2007). Throughout her research, Lee discusses how anti-immigrant discrimination proliferates throughout higher education (e.g., Lee, 2007; Lee et al., 2017; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Neo-racism identifies a form of racism based upon "cultural differences" and maintains a white "way of life" rather than discriminating strictly on perceived (and inaccurate) biological differences (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 389). As Lee and Rice (2007) explained, "neo-racism does *not* replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed" (p. 389). This further perpetuates harm as ICAs continue to be viewed and treated as a monolith.

Today's global, cultural, and national hierarchies are rooted in whiteness – positioning white-dominant nations like the U.S., Canada, and Northern Europe as superior (Lee et al., 2017). Neo-racism flattens and hierarchically organizes entire nations, ethnic groups, and/or religions into greater or less than cultural categories (Lee, 2007). For example, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the U.S. used isolated terrorist events like the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the 9/11 attacks to institute new tracking, documenting, and exclusionary practices targeting predominately Muslim nations (Ruiz, 2014). In 2017, former President Donald Trump perfected this strategy through his *Muslim Ban* or Executive Order 13769, which temporarily prohibited foreign nationals – regardless of their religion – among seven predominately-Muslim countries from entering the United States (ACLU, 2020). Support for these policies was garnered by nationalistic rhetoric to protect U.S. (white) culture and lifestyles, seemingly threatened by the presence of Muslim immigrants (Lee, 2007). In this sense, neo-racism intertwines nationalism, patriotism, and racism by justifying and expanding exclusionary and anti-immigrant policies based on one's culture and national origin if said culture or nation is a perceived threat to white dominance (Lee et al., 2017; Lee & Rice, 2007). Additionally, neo-racism utilizes assimilative rhetoric, espousing which cultures, ethnicities, and nations can and cannot assimilate into a U.S. *white way of life* as further rationale for bolstering anti-immigrant policies (Lee & Rice, 2007). Furthermore, neo-racism is not applied to national origin alone. Racist structures are reproduced as Immigrants of Color continue to face distinctly different exclusionary rhetoric than white immigrants, e.g., targeted as perpetual foreigners, unassimilable, and inherently violent (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Lee's research identified neo-racist practices in higher education that impact ICAs (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). Anti-immigrant discriminatory practices based on one's national origin included:

> …less-than-objective academic evaluations; loss of employment or an inability to obtain a job; difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships with instructors, advisors, and peers; negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of one's culture; negative comments about foreign accents; and so on (p. 28).

For instance, ICAs who are not fluent in English can have lower levels of academic preparedness and fewer interactions with professors (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These outcomes do not reflect academic competency or ability, as some ICAs may be proficient if the material was taught in their native language. But without the proper English-language support services, institutional practices may target them for remedial classes and/or funnel them into a major misaligned with their expertise. ICAs also face discrimination from students, faculty, or staff for their accents or language proficiency while on campus (Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), which can lead to higher rates of stress and depression (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

**Assimilative Athletic Department Cultures**

Athletic departments cultivate assimilative and anti-immigrant cultures. Upon arrival in the U.S., ICAs encounter competitive, elite, hierarchical sporting organizations (Coakley, 2015). DI institutions are known for their entertainment business model that disrupts college athletes' abilities to fully access the educational and career development opportunities promised through intercollegiate athletic participation (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Sack & Straurowsky, 1998). The competitive pressures within college sports create hierarchical structures that encourage and impose authoritativeness, conformity, and dependence (Martens & Lee, 1998; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). These attributes align with assimilation as coaches require athletes to comply with the team norms and values of the host nation (Bale, 1991; Hextrum, 2021b; McGregor, 2022). Rarely do coaches utilize integrationist approaches or embrace a culture of mutual adjustment and interdependence. Instead, college coaches create highly structured and disciplined environments for athletes compared to their non-athlete peers (Martens & Lee, 1998). Authoritative, hierarchical, and assimilationist athletic cultures harm the holistic growth of college athletes, as they are less likely to engage in explanatory behaviors and learn a sense of independence (Martens & Lee, 1998; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005).

Studies continuously document how elite, win-at-all-cost college athletic cultures generate academic conflicts and compromises for athletes (e.g., Bale, 1991; Hextrum, 2020b; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Tatos & Singer, 2021). Bale (1991) found that these conflicts are heightened for ICAs, even in non-revenue-generating sports. He argued that athletic departments exploit ICAs by luring them to the U.S. under false pretenses, using ICAs for their own aims, and not adequately providing for their social, emotional, physical, and educational needs. Due to ICA's precarious visa status – a status often linked to their standing on an athletic team and/or athletic scholarship – they may feel greater pressure to conform to athletic cultures and succumb to school/sport conflicts than their domestic peers (Bale, 1991; Sethi et al., 2022).

Practices within athletic departments that increase school/sport conflicts make it more likely for college athletes to overdevelop and commit to their identities as athletes (Beamon, 2014; Coakley, 2015). One way college athletes cope with time demands is to select majors that accommodate their athletic commitments (Fountain & Finley, 2009). Oftentimes these decisions lead athletes to pursue less rigorous degree programs disconnected from their future goals (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Navarro & Malvaso, 2016). ICAs are more likely to enroll in majors to fit their team's schedules and minimize athletic conflicts (Jara, 2015). ICAs have the added challenge of pursuing majors that may be irrelevant in their home countries (Bale, 1991; Newell, 2015). In part, these academic decisions are motivated by the pressure placed on them by coaches to improve a team's athletic performance (Bale, 1991; Weston, 2006).

ICAs of Color may also endure American racism for the first time, unaware that their skin color marks them as an *other*. Racism, discrimination, and stereotyping of ICAs of Color extend to their living and dining spaces in ways not often experienced by their white domestic and white ICA peers (Lee & Rice, 2007). For example, Lee and Opio (2011) found that athletic departments held different academic expectations for white versus Black college athletes from the African continent. Black Africans were treated paternalistically with greater surveillance and lowered expectations for academic achievement compared to white South Africans. Arab and African ICAs

also experienced higher levels of racism and discrimination like verbal insults, cultural intolerance, and name-calling on college campuses and within team settings, whereas white-European ICAs endured no such harm (Lee & Opio, 2011).

Hextrum's research on non-revenue college athletes' (rowing and track & field) experiences with whiteness found striking differences across race and national identity (Hextrum, 2020a; 2021b). ICAs from Westernized, majority white countries, including Germany, Canada, Britain, and Australia, quickly acclimated to their teams, academic environment, and peer cultures. They also perpetuated harmful white cultures, misrecognizing their own racial supremacist identities and roles in marginalizing domestic Athletes of Color. In many cases, white ICAs could culturally assimilate, and in turn, receive maximum athletic and academic benefits in ways unavailable to Black domestic track & field athletes (Hextrum, 2020a; 2021b). Rather than encourage and reward white international students for perpetuating whiteness, Hextrum (2020a) recommended that athletic departments incorporate anti-racist and social justice-oriented work to begin to eradicate how all white people – regardless of their nation of origin – are centered and uplifted in sports.

Neo-racism imposes whiteness, classness, and Americanness in ways that inherently marginalize international students and disrupt their educational, social, and career experiences. Neo-racism magnifies cultural intolerance against international students and interferes with their well-being, their ability to develop friendships, and how they learn about the host nation (Lee & Rice, 2007). Interviews with ICAs revealed that many do not report their experiences with racism for fear they will be deported (Lee & Rice, 2007). The anti-immigrant discrimination pervading the U.S. broadly and higher education specifically has led international students to "believe they must accept discrimination as the cost of earning an American degree" (Lee, 2007, p. 29). The costs are even higher for ICAs whose athletic talents are expected to improve a team's performance and raise the institutional profiles (Bale, 1991; Lee & Opio, 2011; Weston, 2006). Research finds that campuses rarely counteract neo-racism despite their own inclusive mission, goals, and objectives (Yao, 2015). Without consequences for those who perpetuate anti-immigrant discrimination against ICAs, neo-racism will continue to proliferate throughout higher education (Lee, 2007).

## Assimilation and Life After Sport

Ending one's athletic career poses social, psychological, physical, and career readiness challenges (Newell, 2015). College athletes who transition from sport can experience depression, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, decreased self-worth, mood changes, disordered eating, nutritional challenges, body image issues, and lack of support following the end of their athletic careers (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Papathomas et al., 2018). Adjusting to physical changes, such as new nutritional needs, body image concerns, and weight fluctuations, causes physical and emotional fatigue (Papathomas et al., 2018). These struggles are exacerbated by the loss of community after leaving sport, as athletes no longer have the support of teammates and staff (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Stoltenburg et al., 2011). While emotional and psychological fatigue is common for all athletes, ICAs enter the U.S. with stigmas about mental health and therapy due to the perceptions and opinions of people in their home country. Therefore, they are less likely to use psychological resources during their time at HEIs (Mori, 2000). For those who do seek mental health services,

lack of diversity and cultural insensitivity among counseling staff has often led to negative experiences (Mori, 2000).

Domestic college athletes often have little knowledge or clarity about career readiness compared to their non-athlete peers (Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2012). ICAs face similar struggles as domestic college athletes yet have added immigration and career opportunity difficulties (Sethi et al., 2022). ICAs must decide whether to stay in the U.S. or return home – a decision rife with financial, cultural, emotional, and social concerns (Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2012). Upon arriving home, ICAs may have to complete additional career, technical, or educational training to join their workforce (Newell, 2015). They may also find they no longer fit in with their home country, as they have spent years assimilating to U.S. norms, cultures, and values. If international students want to stay in the U.S., they must find employers willing to sponsor a work visa.

Academic advisors can play an integral role in helping ICAs navigate their career paths. Encouraging ICAs to look beyond their athletic identity and explore diverse career opportunities post-graduation can improve career outcomes (Navarro & Malvaso, 2016; Newell, 2015). Individualized advising for international college students, such as discussing whether they intend to stay in the U.S., can also improve outcomes (Newell, 2015). Yet, *if* career services are offered by athletic departments, they cater to domestic college athletes (Newell, 2015). ICAs require advising that discusses which companies and industries hire international employees and sponsor work visas (Popp et al., 2009). Ideally, academic support service administrators would develop programs that prepare ICAs for myriad post-athletic careers, including inside and outside the U.S. This integrationist approach would help ICAs flourish in their professional careers in the workforce within their home country or the U.S.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

ICAs are drawn to U.S. college sports by the promise of exceptional athletic infrastructure, a world-class education, a holistic college experience, and an opportunity to interact. Inadequate support and innumerable constraints set by coaches and administrators who prioritize athletic performance hurt the overall experience of ICAs while benefitting the institution. Anti-immigrant discrimination and exclusionary practices combined with inadequate support compromise ICA's educational and athletic experiences. Institutions are increasing the number of ICAs enrolled each year. However, their awareness and level of support towards this population remains limited. Thus, is it ethical for HEIs to lure ICAs to their campuses with such hostile climates and inadequate support systems? How can HEIs be held accountable for learning about the diversity within ICAs and offer the support needed to improve their experience? How can HEIs eliminate their assimilative cultures? Will ICAs ever become truly integrated into HEIs if they remain "perpetual foreigners" due to their visa status? After reviewing the literature, these were a few questions we could not resolve and invite future researchers and practitioners to consider.

Research on international college student experiences identifies that HEIs use assimilative and exclusionary tactics, harming the learning outcomes of domestic and international students alike. Fostering a welcoming campus environment and support services to assist international students will improve retention and academic and social outcomes (Weston, 2006). However, doing so is not easy at the athletic department or institutional levels. Racist and anti-immigrant

federal laws combined with discriminatory policies and practices within higher education require systemic reform and long-term solutions. Immigration is a global process requiring actions to eradicate discourses, ideologies, and policies that elevate U.S. culture and whiteness at the exclusion and expense of all those who do not align with these ideals. Achieving such change requires a "certain kind of public culture, one that recognizes the immigrants as legitimate members of society and treats them with respect" (Caren, 2015, p. 44). Thus, federal offices and immigration policies should consider the "desires that most immigrants have for economic and social opportunities similar to those enjoyed by the existing population so that the receiving society is not placing obstacles in the way of immigrants who seek to pursue these opportunities" (Caren, 2015, p. 46). Working toward global and national levels of cultural, economic, and immigration reform will likely take multiple generations. The extensive change required to foster a more humanizing global movement of people does not relieve HEIs from taking modest steps that could lessen the harm they currently commit against international students and ICAs. Here, we discuss a few policies and practices to create a more holistic and inclusive environment for ICAs.

First, HEIs could prohibit anti-immigrant discrimination on their campuses. As discussed throughout, international students and ICAs face rampant and often normalized discrimination based on their linguistic patterns, cultural practices, national origin, and/or race. Yet Lee and Rice (2007) found that few institutions have explicit prohibitions against such actions, leaving international students with little recourse or support. Oftentimes, international students are unaware of their rights to receive an education free from discrimination under federal law (Lee & Rice, 2007). Therefore, we echo Lee and Rice's (2007) recommendation that campuses adopt explicit policies prohibiting anti-immigrant discrimination and educate students, staff, and faculty about said policies. Concurrently, HEIs should create programming to educate all international students about their rights and protections under existing federal anti-discrimination laws.

Second, HEIs must go beyond punitive and carceral actions toward discrimination and foster campus climates that embrace the diverse experiences, knowledge, and culture that international students bring to U.S. HEIs. As part of their mission, most universities espouse that they teach students how to "operate in a multicultural world" (Tierney, 1992, p. 615). International students are vital to this mission. HEIs must educate domestic students to become culturally aware and sensitive (Tierney, 1992). HEIs should also communicate the value international students bring through diverse perspectives, languages, and cultural richness, all of which should be embraced by U.S. college campuses (Wu et al., 2015). For example, DEI offices could host workshops to raise awareness and educate faculty, staff, administrators, and students about the cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, religions etc. within the ICA population. These trainings could help institutional members rid assimilative practices from their units and assist ICAs to retain their unique identities.

Third, HEIs must institutionalize more comprehensive and individually tailored support services for international students and ICAs. This includes redressing campus cultures, norms, and timelines regarding English proficiency while increasing support for English language learning (Wu et al., 2015). Instead of expecting ICAs to learn English on their own, campus departments could assist international students by providing language-specific tutors, language learning workshops, and other online and supplementary resources. Campuses should also teach ICAs

about existing resources like writing centers and tutors. This would increase ICAs' confidence in speaking English in public settings.

Fourth, institutions could combat the siloing of student services and encourage cross-campus collaboration among international student services, student affairs, and athletic departments to better support ICAs. Examples include hosting cultural evenings, country-specific game days, and celebrating different college athletes and their heritage, holidays, and nationality through social media platforms. Cross-collaboration could also focus on specialized career programming that encourages a life-after-sport approach (Meyer, 2017), introduces students to the complexities of the visa and employment process for immigrants and enhances their sense of belonging (Pericak et al., 2023). Researchers find that when campuses offer programming, ICAs can rarely attend due to their demanding athletic schedules (Meyer, 2017). Athletic department staff should ensure ICAs have the chance to attend these workshops and not penalize participants for missing practice or competition to do so. Units should collaboratively host an ICA first-year student orientation to learn about campus, classrooms, cafeterias, and other resources. This can expedite integration as ICAs begin to feel welcomed into unfamiliar spaces. Athletic department staff can support ICAs on their campus by collaborating with the international student services office and student affairs professionals to develop leadership and mentorship programs/workshops. Such collaborations will expand ICAs' professional networks and prepare them to enter the workforce.

Our research also identified areas for specific reforms within athletic departments. To enhance ICAs' academic, athletic, and career experiences, we recommend athletic departments adopt integrative policies and practices throughout their unit. Research has shown that ICA's transition to campus improves when coaches and administrators work collaboratively to support their needs. (Person et al., 2001; Pierce et al., 2012). Integrative practices within athletic departments could minimize school/sport conflicts, support ICA's holistic development, and enrich the experience of their domestic peers. Yet again, reforming athletic departments away from assimilation requires changes throughout the college athletic system. However, interim steps could be implemented to improve ICA's career and athletic trajectories. For instance, athletic departments could develop workshops and listening sessions where they could learn about ICAs' unique cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic contributions (Hong, 2018). They could also educate domestic college athletes about the diversity in the department through seminars, ICA week of celebrations, and other social/cultural events. This model of mutual reciprocity and willingness to understand each other's needs would make athletic departments more inclusive.

In addition to athletic support services like academic advising and career readiness, athletic recruitment also requires reform. During recruitment, coaches should discuss how amateurism and NCAA regulations may differ from athletic rules in ICA's home countries. Coaches should advise ICAs about the challenges of transferring U.S. academic degrees to career fields in other countries. Academic advisors could offer guidance and resources for ICAs to learn about the advantages and limitations of earning a U.S. college degree (Newell, 2015).

Another integrative policy would be to hire and designate an individual or unit to assist ICAs. This unit could connect the athletic department with various student offices to support ICAs in areas like career preparation, monitoring visa statuses, tax documents, travel signatures, and

work authorization approvals. Pairing ICAs with other international students to foster cross-campus and cross-sport interaction can be an enriching experience (Pierce et al., 2012). Encouraging and providing time and resources for ICAs to engage in campus activities, get to know other student organizations, participate in academic and professional workshops, and attend orientations and international student events would allow them to develop a sense of community and build professional networks (Hong, 2018). Lastly, athletic departments may consider forming a safe space for ICAs to discuss their unique needs with one another, which could enhance their sense of community. This can be a first step towards providing underrepresented communities an opportunity to work towards diminishing assimilative tactics, which can often harm their learning outcomes and overall experience at U.S. HEIs.

Finally, our review of research identified how scholars and practitioners treat ICAs differently from domestic students by instituting assimilative practices, treating ICAs as a monolith, and ignoring important in-group differences. The NCAA contributes to this phenomenon by collecting and publishing incomplete data about ICAs. A needed step is for the NCAA to allow ICAs to name their regional, national, linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and racial differences so researchers and practitioners can provide individually tailored support accordingly.

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