



**NCAA International Student-Athlete Inclusion Think Tank**  
**Nov. 30, 2021**  
**Executive Summary**

***OVERVIEW***

The number of international student-athletes at NCAA member schools has risen steadily every year, with more than 20,000 studying and competing today. As this population copes with unique challenges, integration of international student-athletes requires a nuanced intentional approach from athletics departments, administrators, coaches and teammates. Thus, a need has risen in recent years to support the membership and its international student-athlete population by promoting awareness, developing resources and providing guidance to foster international student-athlete inclusion.

In recent years, NCAA office of inclusion staff have been working to become knowledgeable on trends and recurring issues, to engage and build relationships with key stakeholders and subject matter experts, and to lay the foundation for meaningful service to the membership in this field. As part of its strategic plan, the office of inclusion launched the inaugural International Student-Athlete Inclusion Think Tank in late 2021.

***SUMMARY***

On Nov. 30, the office of inclusion gathered more than 50 student-athletes, coaches, administrators and faculty for the inaugural ISA Inclusion Think Tank — an event focused on enhancing inclusion efforts for international student-athletes. The virtual event engaged stakeholders representing more than 15 nationalities in discussions on the various challenges international student-athletes and those who lead them face. The event also involved collective brainstorming on potential solutions to address these challenges, both on the campus and national office levels.

The elevated level of engagement and comprehensive feedback have equipped the office of inclusion with valuable insights, including those of current student-athletes, on this landscape and have yielded information on the urgency for and necessity of further actions — in the immediate, intermediate and long terms. The findings and conclusions regarding members' needs and potential ways to address these needs have been organized here by challenges, campus-level potential solutions and potential solutions at the national office level.

**I. CHALLENGES**

During the ISA Inclusion Think Tank, participants discussed, listed and reached consensus on the most prevalent issues international student-athletes and those who lead them face. Among the

challenges identified as needed to be addressed by schools and the national office are the following:

- Before arrival on campus, many international student-athletes are faced with hardships such as a lack of knowledge on U.S. academic structure, NCAA structure, a timeline for pre-college preparations, and potential blind spots when engaging with for-profit recruiting agencies.
- During their first year in particular, international student-athletes are most vulnerable, as they are more likely to transfer (25% versus only 14% of domestic student-athletes) and less likely to report having a sense of belonging compared with domestic student-athletes (72% versus 79%).<sup>1</sup> This indicates a need to concentrate inclusive efforts around the initial transition period, addressing hardships revolving around cultural gaps, nutrition adjustments and lack of orientation, both on campus and in the community.
- Throughout their entire period of eligibility, ongoing difficulties include access to resources, mental health issues, financial issues, and the impact of immigration laws on name, image and likeness opportunities.
- During the later stages of their eligibility, as international student-athletes near graduation, they are faced with complexities related to a lack of knowledge on post-graduation options. This includes Optional Practical Training (for students with an F-1 visa only), internship/employment opportunities and general professional development avenues.

## II. CAMPUS-LEVEL POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

After identifying challenges, participants discussed, listed and reached consensus regarding feasible actions that can be taken within athletics departments and schools to address those. Of note, out of multiple solutions identified, the vast majority are not associated with any cost, while some require people power allotment and minimal financial investment. The following potential campus-level solutions were identified for action by athletics administrators, coaches and other staff members:

- **Educational Efforts:** Ensure international student-athletes' competency with language skills and academics and provide guidance on major selection in advance. This can be achieved by proper use of on-campus resources (such as a writing center, academic advising, etc.) and by connecting international student-athletes with students/advisors of similar nationality.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: NCAA GOALS (Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College) Study, 2019.

- **Social and Cultural Efforts:** Ensure a comprehensive orientation about the campus and community, including on social facet. Training coaches on cultural sensitivity is highly recommended.
- **Accountability Efforts:** Maintain a relationship with the international affairs office, exchange knowledge with the conference office and implement accountability measures that ensure coaches and staff are aware of the need to enhance international student-athletes' sense of belonging. Designating an international student-athlete liaison is highly recommended.
- **Intentional Initiatives Efforts:** Employ creative methods to enhance international student-athletes' sense of belonging. Athletics administrators may create evergreen documents such as a handbook or a checklist, establish a mentorship program, start an international student-athlete club, and facilitate engagements in designated career fairs or with recruiting companies. Organizing cultural celebrations and other events to recognize international student-athletes and their achievements is highly recommended.

### **III. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS AT THE NATIONAL OFFICE LEVEL**

Think Tank participants discussed, listed and reached consensus on potential actions from the national office that will address the needs faced by international student-athletes and those who lead them. Throughout the course of their discussions, NCAA staff clarified that the purpose of the brainstorming session was to seek raw ideas about the needs and challenges that were identified, without assessing the feasibility of proposed suggestions. Therefore, the list includes some ideas of lower feasibility, as well. Potential solutions at the national office level include the following:

- **Centralized Efforts:** Create a network to share knowledge and a database of all current international student-athletes by country, as well as establish a working group to address international student-athlete issues.
- **Educational/Awareness Efforts:** Provide resources and opportunities to learn more about topics such as NIL for students with F-1 visas, the benefits of having international student-athletes on campus, recruitment agencies and more.
- **Funding Efforts:** Provide funds to facilitate international student-athletes' access to immigration expertise or legal support, annual grants allocated toward research, graduate assistant positions, emergency travel, etc.
- **Increased-Impact Efforts:** Create a national-level mentorship program, conduct an annual summit, facilitate coach education initiatives, and more.

### ***CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS***

Of note, some proposed solutions at the national office level overlap and/or complement some campus-level potential solutions, thus further strategic thinking is required to determine which specific initiatives can yield the highest impact.

Given the extensive list of viable, cost-free solutions compiled, it is fair to state that a considerable part of the adversity international student-athletes experience can be alleviated by enhanced intentionality and awareness of decision-makers within athletics departments. It is evident that the national office will have to play a vital role in educating schools and members within the athletics community on the feasible minimal-cost solutions they can implement on campus.

The office of inclusion has shared the findings internally with relevant national office units whose work overlaps with the international student-athlete space, as well as with the think tank participants. The office of inclusion is currently conducting a cost-benefit analysis of all potential solutions included in this document, assessing potential impact. Eventually, the staff will decide on specific initiatives that will be carried out in the intermediate and long term. For the immediate term, staff members are working to generate two new resources, to be released by summer, about best practices for coaches, administrators and athletics departments. Staff are also planning an educational session on the topic during the 2022 Inclusion Forum.