



International Hispanic Intercollegiate Student-Athletes in NCAA Division I: A Qualitative Exploration of Culture in the Student-Athlete Experience

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Participation of both Hispanic and international student-athletes at the intercollegiate level has more than doubled in the past decade. Despite this growth, little is known about the Hispanic International Student-Athlete (ISA) experience. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Hispanic ISAs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Hispanic ISAs on varsity sport teams at NCAA Division I universities in the Midwestern U.S. Language was the predominant theme that made the collective experience most difficult. While a supportive social network served as exchangeable cultural capital useful for navigating a new environment, imbalance still existed in participants' lives due to discontinuity between the demands of being an intercollegiate student-athlete and ingrained cultural identities. The study offers practical recommendations for stakeholders, including administrators, coaches, and support personnel, who work with Hispanic ISAs.

Hispanics account for 18.3% of the United States' (U.S.) population and are the largest ethnic minority in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The group is growing by approximately 2% per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Hispanic student-athletes are the fastest growing population in the multidivisional collegiate sport organization (Ortega, 2019), making up 4% of participants (N=15,752) in 2008 while increasing in representation to 6% (N= 28,300) ten years later in 2018 (NCAA, 2019). Specifically, the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) of the NCAA has seen its population of Hispanics jump from less than 4% in 2008 to more than 5% in 2018 (NCAA, 2019). In addition to the increase of identified Hispanic student-athletes in the NCAA, international student-athlete (ISA) participation has doubled in the last decade as recruiting competition continues to increase (Jara-Pazmino et al., 2017; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a).

While more Hispanics and ISAs are participating in intercollegiate sport each year, data on those who identify in both groups in the context of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) is scarce. Higher education is least successful in retaining and graduating members of the Hispanic ethnic group (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Pérez, 2014; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2008), and only 7% of bachelor's degrees conferred in 2017 were earned by Hispanics (NCES, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). ISAs are at risk due to factors such as language and cultural barriers and mental health (Pierce et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2014). Even domestic student-athletes tend to perform worse academically, exhibit lower graduation rates, and be at greater risk of attrition than non-athletes due to conflicts among academic and athletic demands (Johnson et al., 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Minority student-athletes are at a greater risk because of the combination of their unique overlapping positions as minorities and athletes (Hill, 1993).

Currently, comprehensive research on exclusively Hispanic student-athletes is limited to small samples or narrowed groups (e.g., one Cuban football player in Turk et al. [2017]). Differences in cultural capital (e.g., predominant language, values, and behavioral expectations Chun & Dickson, 2011; Sato et al., 2011) in conjunction with discrimination, cultural isolation, low expectations, and increased risk of academic attrition (Corona et al., 2017) demonstrate that Hispanics' experiences are exclusive and warrant research apart from other student-athlete cultural subgroups. With the growing Hispanic population, it is pertinent that NCAA universities become better resourced to serve Hispanic student-athletes. The numbers for athletes in these groups are growing, and both ISAs and Hispanic student-athletes are unique to existing research. If the unique perspectives of this group are not better understood, there is a likelihood of continued educational attrition, low performance, and challenge in cultural adjustment. Distinctive from existing research, and relative to the current trend of recruiting ISAs, the current study examined Hispanic ISAs attending Division I FBS universities as a means to begin to understand the Hispanic student-athlete experience. Throughout the current study, *Hispanic*- rather than *Latino/Latinx*- is utilized due to participants' self-identification with that term. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to better understand the experiences of international Hispanic NCAA intercollegiate student-athletes. The intended outcomes were to provide theoretical contributions to both Hispanic student-athlete and ISA literature as well as pragmatic programming implications for those who work with Hispanic and international student-athletes.

Literature Review

As the Hispanic population continues to grow, the body of literature on Hispanics in education has expanded. However, there is a gap in understanding the experiences of Hispanic student-athletes in NCAA DI athletics, though more Hispanics are participating in NCAA sport each year. This section aims to highlight what is known about Hispanics in the education system in the United States, intercollegiate student-athletes, and international student-athletes, and before narrowing to existing studies on Hispanic student-athletes.

Hispanics in Education

The high school dropout rate among Hispanics was higher than the dropout rate for both Whites and Blacks each year from 2000 to 2016 (NCES, 2018), though it has seen a decrease from 27.8 to 8.6 percent over that same span of time (NCES, 2018). Yet in higher education, universities have conferred degrees to only 22% of Hispanics compared with 47% of Whites (Barshay, 2018), and Hispanics are least likely of any racial group to complete a degree (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015). These powerful statistics represent how Hispanic students might believe they are incapable of achieving a college degree because systems work against them (Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2008).

Differences in language, values, and behavioral expectations between cultures are critical challenges facing Hispanics at PWIs (Chun & Dickson, 2011). In higher education, Hispanics experience stressors like cultural isolation, lack of access to same-ethnicity role models, low education expectations, increased risk of academic attrition, and increased risk of mental health issues (Corona et al., 2017). Discrimination (ASHE, 2013; Pérez, 2014), bilingualism (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Rivas, 2013), and immigrant-status (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015) also impede academic achievement. Additionally, Hispanics, particularly males, might experience peer rejection resulting from the stigma of academic excellence being perceived as *acting White*, which highlights the mismatch with the group and PWI norms (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008). Throughout the educational pipeline, Hispanics face other “leaks” such as unequal K-12 schooling conditions, cumbersome transfer processes from community colleges, limited baccalaureate options, and educational isolation or alienation (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006).

Despite the clash in routine practices, traditions, values, and structures between Hispanics and PWIs, Hispanic parents desire and prioritize further education for their children, but due to linguistic barriers, limited personal American educational experiences, and lack of understanding for how to provide support, they often entrust their children to manage their academics (ASHE, 2013; Pérez, 2014). Familial relationships aid in Hispanic students’ academic success and sense of belonging in college simply as a source of a strong social network and social capital that can facilitate lifelong educational success (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Maintaining familial relationships is most critical to Hispanic student success and adjustment to university life, and students who do so are more likely to graduate (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Hispanic cultural values, like family, can impact their success in the education system. Family is an asset of cultural capital for Hispanics, along with values such as gender roles, religion, and respect for elders (Corona et al., 2017). Bourdieu (1986) deemed cultural capital as the set of skills, tastes, networks, and habits that works as capital for majority and elite groups. Possession of such capital helps individuals navigate social institutions, like schools, and is

important for an individual's sense of belonging (Putnam, 2000). *Familismo*, or familyism, is the word to describe a connectedness with family and is a social pattern unique to Hispanics in which family interests receive higher priority than the interests of individuals (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015). Hispanics may feel an enhanced sense of duty to family, which can lead to suppressed feelings of and prioritizing family needs over individual needs (Corona et al., 2017). Accessed healthily, *familismo* should not be seen as a negative force but rather as a socio-cultural asset for navigating higher education (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). *Familismo* can serve as a buffer against perceived discrimination and might be the most important cultural factor in the mental health of Hispanics in college (Corona et al., 2017).

Another cultural value, *disfrutando*, presents dissonance of Hispanic culture and the U.S. education system. *Disfrutando*, literally translated to *enjoying*, is another trait of Hispanic culture that emphasizes enjoying family and friends while prioritizing balance between work and life (Gonzales, 2012). *Disfrutando* highlights a divergence from ideals of traditional American culture like competition and individualism and aligns with conventional Hispanic values of community, selflessness, cooperation, and interdependence. This concept tends to conflict with the traditional, capitalistic American approach to education. PWIs have a predetermined set of values, perspectives, assumptions, and norms that serve as cultural capital. When this cultural capital does not align with principles that work as capital for other backgrounds, the traditional PWI can appear exclusive and marginalizing to underrepresented races, ethnicities, and individuals (Kiyama et al., 2015).

Intercollegiate Student-Athletes

Before examining the academic experiences of Hispanic ISAs, it is important to understand how participation in college athletics affects the academic metrics of all student-athletes. NCAA Division I student-athletes are at risk of low performance and attrition in higher education due to conflicting academic and athletic demands (Johnson et al., 2012; Nite, 2012; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). Participation in athletics, especially in basketball and football, has been found to lead to lower academic achievement, regardless of student-athletes' race (McNulty-Eitle & Eitle, 2002). Despite trends of academic underperformance and over prioritization of athletics, most student-athletes' athletic careers conclude when their college athletic eligibility ends (Nite, 2012). Though unlikely that student-athletes have post-college athletic opportunities, student-athletes at the NCAA Division I's FBS are at an increased risk of underperformance because of the commercialization and stereotypes existing in elite college sport (Sperber, 2001; Weiner, 2009). However, other student-athletes see athletics as their motivation for academic persistence (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

International Student-Athletes. The current study examined student-athletes who dually identified as Hispanic but also international student-athletes, which presents the need to explore the literature on experiences for international students who come to the U.S. to participate in athletics. International student-athlete (ISA) enrollment has doubled over the last decade, largely due to competitiveness among coaches to recruit the top domestic athletes (Jara-Pazmino et al., 2017). The NCAA Division I structure provides a unique opportunity for elite athletes from outside the U.S. to pursue high-quality academics and athletics concurrently. In a study on ISAs reasons for coming to the U.S., Love and Kim (2011) found that motives varied depending on gender and place of origin but that ISAs were primarily motivated by earning an

education via athletic scholarship, the quality of athletic competition in intercollegiate sport in the U.S., or the quality of university and intercollegiate athletic facilities (Love & Kim, 2011).

Upon arrival at the U.S. institution and integration into an American team, ISAs face unique challenges in their adjustments and transition. Pierce et al. (2011) found that homesickness, cultural differences, and language barriers were the most difficult parts of transitioning to U.S. college sport, especially after the novelty and initial excitement weakens. While adapting to life in a new country, ISAs also must navigate new organizational structures in athletics and academics. Participants in Pierce et al (2011) shared that they did not fully understand the level of commitment and dedication required of NCAA DI athletes and that more knowledge of the levels of college sport, familiarity with coaches, and ISA support opportunities might have impacted their decisions in the recruiting process. ISAs share that it is important for prospective ISAs to understand what they are “getting themselves into” (Pierce et al., 2011, para. 16), referring to the dedication required of NCAA student-athletes, before committing to a university. Additionally, Popp et al (2009) found that ISAs rated the competition element of intercollegiate athletics significantly lower than domestic student-athletes. While pre-college resources, experiences, and environments vary among ISAs, a commonality is that the athletic and academic parts of ISAs’ lives were completely separate, contrary from domestic student-athletes who have grown up in an environment where athletics and academics have nearly always been integrated (Popp et al., 2009). The shift from a club environment apart from interscholastic athletics in their native countries to the NCAA is a difficult transition for first year ISAs (Popp et al., 2009).

As they are in transition, ISAs face greater threat of experiencing anxiety, stress, culture shock, depressive symptoms, and social isolation than their domestic non-athlete peers (Rodriguez, 2014). These characteristics overlap with the aforementioned challenges both student-athletes and Hispanic students face in higher education. These feelings can impact ISAs in the classroom and on the field, putting them at an athletic and/or academic disadvantage. While one study on ISAs suggests they adjust better to college than international non-athlete students and even domestic non-athletes due to their athletic resources and networks (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b), other studies indicate gaps in connecting ISAs with available resources on their campuses (Boucher, 2017; Newell, 2015; Pierce et al., 2011). Boucher (2017) indicated that ISAs felt they were not set up for success, mentioning the lack of timelines and information for paperwork, protocols, and contacts specific to them as ISAs. Cultural and linguistic barriers make the challenging transitions harder, but much ISA support via general university academic or athletic advisors does not include English as a Second Language or cultural transition support (Newell, 2015). Many ISAs have to rely on social networks and athletes from their native country to adjust, whereas others bond with other international students or ISAs of other nationalities due to their shared cross-cultural adjustment (Popp et al., 2010). For ISAs, initial adjustment is the most critical for positive intercollegiate student-athlete experiences, including academic, social, athletic, personal/emotional, and institutional outcomes (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a).

Hispanic Student-Athletes. The current body of literature on Hispanic student-athletes is somewhat limited to small sample, qualitative studies with little generalizable information and studies with exclusive parameters such as sport participation or nationality. Differently from any racial subgroup of college athletes, Hispanic student-athletes’ experiences are most impacted by language barriers which shape how they perform academically, athletically, and socially (Sato et

al., 2011). Hispanic student-athletes report feelings of invalidated cultural identity among both non-Hispanic student-athlete peers and non-athlete fellow Hispanics (Ortega, 2019). Turk et al (2017), in an examination of one Cuban football student-athlete in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), reported that negative student-athlete stereotypes in the classroom, such as professors assuming that he was academically unmotivated and uninterested in learning, were harmful. For the participant, a support system, specifically the participant's family, was a buffer to the stressors faced throughout his experience.

Likewise, familial relationships and parents or siblings played a critical role in Hispanic women's participation in sport (Darvin et al., 2017). Their self-motivation, family, and coaching relationships contributed to their persistence in sport at an elite (NCAA Division 1) level (Darvin et al., 2017). However, former Latina female student-athletes report that long-term overcoming of barriers to academic and athletic success led to a greater understanding of who they are ethnically, attributing support systems composed of peer mentors and staff as the network playing the largest role in their success (Guillame & Trujillo, 2018). Among other examples of non-familial support, community colleges provided critical support for Hispanic student-athletes (Martinez, 2018). Hispanics are more likely to enroll in community colleges or non-research universities rather than research institutions like many NCAA Division schools (Ma & Baum, 2016), and at community colleges with athletics, Hispanic student-athletes have received services for developing skills for further higher education and athletic experience that they might not have had in traditional four-year PWIs (Martinez, 2018).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The CRT framework challenges the worldviews popularly found in research, since contemporary research generally evaluates diversity in a non-critical race mindset (Delgado Bernal, 2002). As a result, the majority perspective often is perceived as the norm, and experiences, motivations, aspirations, and views of non-majority populations might be ignored or delegitimized. This pertains to the present study, as Hispanic ISAs are navigating a majority perspective and cultural norms of PWIs and are making cultural adaptations and adjustments. Acquiring a critical race lens allows the researcher to uncover new knowledge from the experiences of minorities, and in the context of this research, Hispanic student-athletes' stories are shared as an alternative to the systemic norms. CRT focuses on the systemic but covert ways in which traditions, values, and structures continue racial inequality in higher education (Bensimon & Bishop, 2011). Instead of seeing Hispanic cultural capital as abnormal and the expectations of PWIs as normal, Hispanic perspective is given value and legitimacy via CRT (Delgado Bernal, 2002). For example, upon observing data on Hispanic graduation rates, the CRT perspective encourages that the researcher assume focus on the existing barriers in higher education that explicitly harm Hispanic students and further advantage majorities.

CRT is relevant to this research because of how Hispanics tend to identify (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau, like the NCAA, distinguishes Hispanic ethnicity from race. The 2010 census revealed that, while 94% of the U.S. population selected at least one of the five government-defined races (White, Black, Asian, American Indian, or Pacific Islander), Hispanics were less likely to identify with those races (Humes et al., 2011). Instead, 37% of Hispanics selected "other," and many wrote in self-identified races such as *Mexican*, *Latin American*, or *Hispanic*. The self-identification issue has made it difficult for the Census Bureau and other data collectors like the NCAA to isolate one term. The result is a combination

of terms often leading to *Hispanic or Latino* as a single response item (Gonzalez-Barrera & Hugo Lopez, 2015). In the present study, the term used is Hispanic because participants responded to recruitment information using that language. For Hispanics living in the U.S., Hispanic identity is multifaceted, sometimes defined most by their country of origin or other times closer connected to terms like *Hispanic* or *Latino*, which are defined based on heritage from Spain (Hispanic; colonizers, oppressors) versus Latin America (Latinos; indigenous, colonized, oppressed). Ultimately, most (56%) Hispanics consider their Hispanic background to be part of their racial *and* ethnic backgrounds (Parker et al., 2015). With the combination of Hispanics who see their Hispanic background as only racial, or racial and ethnic, two-thirds (67%) of Hispanic adults identify their background as their racial background.

As with other racial data, the collective survey groups of Hispanics include a still diverse population; CRT promotes that it is equally important to understand that “the life experiences of students of color are ‘uniquely individual while at the same time both collective and connected’” (Dillard, 2000, p. 676). CRT does not strive to compartmentalize racism or racial experiences but rather to focus on the intersectionality amidst differences among them (Delgado Bernal, 2002). In the context of a qualitative study, this is important, as the goal of the research is not to generalize or essentialize the Hispanic population but rather to expand and develop theory.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, CRT helped develop the research question: *What are international Hispanics’ experiences as intercollegiate student-athletes?* The current study uses a CRT lens and storytelling to share the Hispanic ISA perspective, highlighting commonalities and uniqueness from experience to experience. CRT and the positionality of the researcher guided and influenced the development of the interview protocol, the data analysis and reflection, and the interpretation of results.

Method

Participants were student-athletes at NCAA Division I FBS institutions in the Midwest who are natives of a Hispanic country. Thus, the term Hispanic was determined by the author per the participants’ nationalities, and Hispanic is the term used throughout the paper, as the study sought to focus on those of Spanish origin, culture, and language. The study was limited to NCAA student-athletes from schools who are part of the NCAA’s Division I FBS. As a further criterion, student-athletes represented institutions that are located in one of three Midwestern states - Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. These states were chosen for convenience so that face-to-face interviews could occur in the participants’ natural environment (Creswell, 1998).

The study included 12 participants before data saturation occurred: three males and nine females. The sample included eight participants from the Mid-American Conference (MAC), three participants the Big 10 Conference, and one participant from the American Athletic Conference (AAC), and the sports represented included basketball, field hockey, soccer, swimming and diving, tennis, and track and field. Most of the participants (9) received a full scholarship for their athletic participation, and the other three students-athletes received at least 65% of their tuition in scholarship. Participants were natives of Chile (1), Colombia (2), Mexico (3), and Spain (6), and all participants were non-native English speakers. Additional demographic information about participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Information

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Country	Conference	Sport
1	Alvaro	20	Spain	Big Ten	Tennis
2	Candi	18	Colombia	MAC	Soccer
3	Carla	21	Spain	MAC	Basketball
4	Emilia	20	Spain	MAC	Field Hockey
5	José	21	Mexico	MAC	Tennis
6	Magdalene	23	Spain	MAC	Field Hockey
7	Marta	20	Colombia	MAC	Soccer
8	Noemi	21	Mexico	AAC	Track & Field
9	Paz	21	Spain	MAC	Soccer
10	Pilar	20	Spain	MAC	Field Hockey
11	Raúl	20	Mexico	Big Ten	Swimming & Diving
12	Sara	19	Chile	Big Ten	Field Hockey

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted from the researcher's university. Contact information for potential participants was obtained from university athletic websites, specifically from team rosters and public email directories. After contacting the population (N=60) for recruitment in a study of international Hispanic student-athlete experiences, in-person interviews were scheduled with participants. Thirty-four did not respond and 14 declined to participate. Interviews occurred at off-campus locations of the participants' choice, which was the parameter approved by IRB. During the interviews, participants responded to open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format that related to the purpose of the study and the underlying theoretical frameworks. The interviews started with broad, open ended questions such as *Describe your relationships during your time as a student-athlete, what have been some of your biggest challenges (academically, socially, and athletically)?*, or *Describe the support you have from your athletic department*, followed by follow-up questions to extend or clarify participant's statements. Questions were ordered intentionally from least to most invasive so that the researcher and interviewee could develop rapport before discussing more challenging questions, but the semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to ask questions as appropriate or skip questions based on the flow of the conversation. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded and were transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were transcribed by the author and an online transcribing service, rev.com. The transcriptions were returned to the participant to be member-checked for accuracy and as a measure of trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Three participants approved the transcription with no changes, and one clarified her major of study, but the other participants did not respond to the member-checking process. Thematic analysis was used as the technique for analyzing the data in this study, following Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) suggestions of six general steps for conducting thematic analysis, starting with familiarization with the data through transcribing, re-reading, and reflecting. Then, using open and axial coding, initial codes were generated, and themes defined and reviewed. In this step, open coding involved labeling concepts and developing categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), and axial coding expanded the developed and existing concepts to confirm accuracy of their representation and explore

relationships among the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The codes were reduced to statements, subthemes, and themes prior to writing the results and reporting the findings.

The research methods established trustworthiness to ensure a quality qualitative study. Through member checking and sharing the final transcriptions with participants as well as the rapport established from face-to-face interviews, the authors confirmed their messages and gained credibility. The study utilized a large sample and rich quotes in the findings to contribute to its transferability and an audit trail to document the study's consistency or dependability. Most importantly, as the study utilized CRT and the researcher was an outsider, reflexivity was central to the study's neutrality and keeping the focus on the participants and inquiry.

Findings

Through thematic analysis of the twelve participants' interviews, 15 sub-themes emerged and were organized into four main themes: *the bubble*, *imbalance*, *cultural adaptation*, and *living the dream*, and a central theme: *language* (Figure 1). Language, the central theme, influenced who comprised *the bubble*, was a part of why there was *imbalance* in participants' lives, added to the newness experienced in *cultural adaptation*, and contributed to *living the dream*.

Language

All participants had substantial experience with English before coming to the U.S., but the linguistic transition was most challenging to overcome, and many agreed they had yet to overcome it.

Magdalene, the oldest participant, reflected on how her comfort with English and social habits had changed over time and expanded her network beyond her roommate:

Social- now I don't think I have any trouble but the beginning, I used to be really shy. I think here I changed a lot. But at the beginning, because of language but I didn't used to not speak to anybody. It was my roommate. It was bad.

The Hispanic ISAs experienced new situations daily, and they were constantly making cultural adaptations, including linguistic changes like translating in their heads, decoding slang and humor, and keeping up with the pace of conversations. Paz, a soccer player from Spain, elaborated on how language inflicted fear in her transition: "I was scared when I came here. Because I'm kind of shy. Like meeting people and stuff. And even more when it's in another language that I don't share." Marta, a soccer player from Colombia shared that language's impact in her experience was her biggest challenge, even as a second-year student-athlete "I would say adapting to the different cultures and styles... at one point I didn't really want to talk people 'cause I was like, 'I feel bad.' People don't understand me."

Language deficiencies in social situations caused anxiety for both Alvaro and Raul. Álvaro, a tennis player from Spain, noted that his academic and athletic pursuits were somewhat impacted by language, but that language deficiencies in social situations caused him the most anxiety. Raul's comment exemplifies this:

I would say socially is the hardest thing because, starting with the translation in my head. That I have to translate everything that I am still not used to speaking in English... like

some of the things I would like saying in Spanish because I just come up with a really good joke in Spanish. Like, 'Oh [expletive] this does not work in English', so... that like kind of affects my way to socialize with people... And when you don't know what it was, what you want to say, it's already past that.

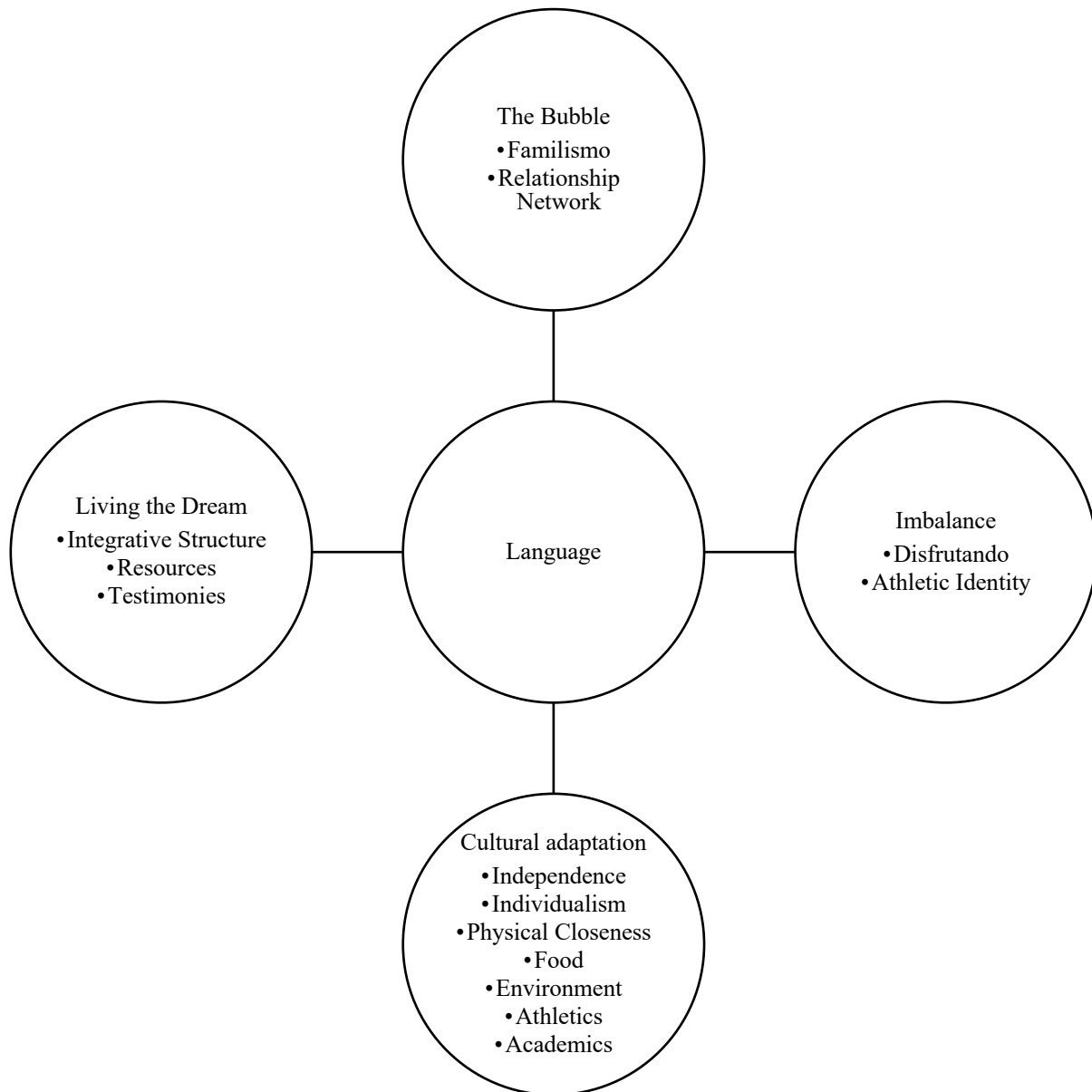


Figure 1.
Diagram of Themes

While it was not as easy for her to make friends in the U.S. compared to Spain, Carla's teammates were a pre-existing group that helped connect her despite the language barrier that took away from Carla feeling like herself. A basketball player, Carla discussed how her personality and identity were transformed due to language differences:

I think the language, for me, makes it hard because I'm a person that jokes a lot and kinda throws shade, but like, not in a bad way and that's probably not taken the same way here than it is in Spain... So, I'm outgoing and all of this stuff, but here I just seem like a different person just because of the language barrier, and that's kind of frustrating because, back home, I was able to make friends easily and click with people easily and here it's like, 'Okay. Haha I'm alone here.'

Language played a role in each of the forthcoming main themes.

The Bubble

The title *the bubble* stemmed from a comment from Magdalene: "As my coach says, we [student-athletes] are living in our own bubble and we should probably try to other stuff become more part of other clubs or anything...". Though negatively referenced by Magdalene's coach, the shared understandings of teammates and fellow ISAs were referenced as the best source of support by most participants. Marta said of her social experience:

I feel like in a way, you kind of have to [be friends with teammates] 'cause you're forced to do that 'cause you're here alone. You don't have family close. You don't have anything, anyone... And building that kind of friendships makes things easier 'cause sometimes- I'm not gonna lie- sometimes I don't wanna be here. Sometimes I miss really home you know? So having that kind of people who push you helps a lot.

Candi shared how her teammates explicitly took on family-like roles:

... the women's soccer- we're family. They [teammates] were always looking if I needed anything. Like, 'Do you understand? Do you need a ride? Are you okay?... So they include me, since first got here... Like, I don't know if kind of to protect me, but like to teach me, 'Hey, you can't do this.' Like, 'Do this thing.' Or 'this way.' And, 'That's how you should do this.'

Álvaro expressed that his teammates and his athletic status made the experience and transition manageable: "I think without a team, this would be tougher.... Because at the end of the day I have that backup... it is something more than just being nice. It's how our lives relate..."

Imbalance

Participating Hispanic ISAs struggled to find balance between their roles as students and athletes. The pursuit of balance was an intense adjustment, and they struggled to adapt to different cultural mindsets, new demands between academic and athletic workloads, and less time for socializing. Sara, a Chilean field hockey player, summarized the disharmony of

priorities by explaining, “[at home] you just had this priority to be with your friends, to have this time with your friends. And in here... it's not one of the big priorities we have every week.” José, a Mexican tennis player, explained, “[In Mexico] I did not have trouble. I went to school and to practice and just did some homework and stuff like that that I had to do. So it was pretty, I would say, in control.” But on his experience in the U.S., he said, “Honestly, it's really tough to balance.”

Álvaro perceived his home and school cultures as very different due to what he described as an “economic” mentality of Americans: “Everything is related with how you do something if you get awarded. So that mentality of having a purpose to do something because it's gonna give you back something... I don't think we have that [in Spain].” He also expressed how he missed this cultural trait: “I think at the end of the day that [Hispanic] mentality is better.”

Similarly, Carla explained the academic and athletic pressure she had placed on herself due to a perceived difference in American mentality as opposed to the mindset she embodied in Spain:

At the beginning, it kinda stressed me out because I was not getting everything done, but I also think that my classes have gotten harder and I don't realize that. I just keep thinking, like, it's just taking me forever because I'm being lazy and ... No, maybe my classes are actually more demanding and... I was like, stressed out and I had... Not a mental breakdown, but, like, I was like, I can't do this. And I just decided to stop putting pressure on myself, get done what I can get done, and just enjoy my time here and still work hard.”

She elaborated,

...in the past, I never had pressure on myself, but this year, I don't know why, I started putting...More pressure... and, at some point, I just, like, kinda made a decision of letting it go and just getting done as much as I can.

Most participants acknowledged the difference in commitment required of them in the U.S. compared to in their native countries.. For example, Sara said, “...the commitment with a sport is different. My teammates are really committed with what they're doing right now. And they try to take it as seriously as they can. Back in Chile, I had my friends and my team- I would just- we played around a lot. But here, we take very seriously what we have to do.” She added: “Our routine from like Monday through Friday is just kinda the same. It's school, practice, study.”

Cultural Adaptation

This section highlights cultural adaptation Hispanic ISAs go through in their transition to being a college athlete. The theme of cultural adaptation encompasses the following emergent themes: independence, individualism, physical closeness, food, environment, athletics, and academics. When asked about her greatest challenges, Candi, a freshman Colombian soccer player, shared, “They always ask, 'Have you ever been to this restaurant? Have you ever been to this city? Have you ever-?' And I'm like, 'Everything here is new, so don't even ask.’” The prevalent newness influenced adaptation in balancing their family networks and independence,

changes in food and meal experiences, resilience in geopolitical environments, adjustments to athletic cultures, and different academic structures.

First, participants shared that their family networks were a significant source of support in their lives at home. Many talked about the challenges of managing newfound independence when moving to the U.S. for college as well as individualism they noted in domestic peers. For example, Candi explained,

People here- maybe they focus more on themselves...Back in my home they're kind of warm people, so you will always- always if you are out or walking around they will always be like, 'Good morning. Good afternoon.'...It's something that I have not seen here.

Álvaro reflected how cultural differences and individualism impacted him in academics, athletics, and social experiences:

...I think the individualistic difference is big, because it's just- American mentality is that. I think it relates from being competitive with each other and, and just competition. Ha. Like, the mentality is just compete in everything. It's just- you're in school, you're competing. You're in tennis, you're competing. You're in jobs, you're competing.

Participants also noted their adjustment to a lack of physical warmth through hugs and kisses and new ways to conceptualize interpersonal communication in the U.S. Carla shared, "...I [also] think that people here are different with the personal space and all that." She added:

I think the way we're raised in Spain is like we are allowed to be closer to people when you talk to them... To say 'hi', we give two kisses... you're kind of in that person's personal space... And here, it's like you give a hug and it's, like, a side hug, but... to me it's not even a hug... And then when you're talking to people, I notice sometimes that they're like, 'Back up.' I'm like, 'Okay, I'm sorry' haha.

Raúl, a freshman swimmer from Mexico, recalled an embarrassing experience with this:

Actually I- hahaha- when I first arrived here, I unfortunately I kissed my academic counselor. And I was like, 'Hey.' And then later she texts me- she's from Colombia- like, 'Okay I know that our culture does that, but that is a *no* in the US, so be careful with that.' I was like, 'Oh, thank you. Sorry!'

Second, while no interview questions specifically pertained to food, all participants offered food, particularly mealtime experiences, as one of the most noticeable cultural adaptations. Paz and Sara expressed that dining halls, meal plans, and dorm living with ingredients and food that they do not get to choose or prepare has made them adapt and miss homemade food and variety to which they are accustomed in Colombia and Chile. Marta jokingly said that her perception of U.S. culture "...was, like, eating fast food, going to Disney." She said, "It's [the food] totally different." Magdalene, a field hockey player from Spain, commented:

I'm not saying that the food here is bad but the food there is different...at home, we have two hours school, we have a break, it's two hours, you have all the time. It's just sit down, eat, rest. Here it's just you have 15 minutes to eat. I don't know if it's because we're in college, that's normal for how you eat... but it's just so fast. You just eat as fast as you can to not waste any time.

Third, the geopolitical environments posed clear challenges for the participants. Many were accustomed to a more temperate climate than what they found in the Midwestern U.S., and the temperature was a popular topic among participants, like Emilia, a Spanish field hockey player, who said,

I would like if there would be more sun. Hahaha. But it really makes a difference. Like I really feel like I get depressed when there's not sun. In Spain it's always sunny. And it makes me like, not sad, but I feel like sometimes kind of sad that it's always so- the weather's not very good.

Many participants also had grown up in ultra-urban environments such as Madrid, Santiago, and Mexico City before moving to the U.S. to attend colleges in small towns or rural settings. For Pilar, a field hockey player from Spain, this was a significant challenge: "...we live like in a small like college town, so it's not like a big city, like Madrid where you can just do everything."

From a political perspective, several participants acknowledged varying degrees of stereotyping that they had not faced before but experienced in the U.S. due to their nationality or language. Candi talked about judgements others make based on her nationality: "I just feel uncomfortable when I introduce myself. I'm like, 'Yeah I'm from Colombia.' And then you know they talk about narcos and like, ahhhh... They're always gonna ask you about problems with narcos." Raúl said that he has experienced racism "just as jokes." He said of his teammates, "They're like, 'Mexico- taking our jobs.' Ya know? And I'm like, 'Shut up' hahaha...not intentionally hurting, it's just team games." Emilia shared her experience with lack of understanding and misconceptions: "Some people really think that speaking Spanish means that I'm from Mexico."

Fourth, their athletic experiences also were new and different. While social experiences, largely spurred by language difference, were the most distressing for participants, participants did share that there were some differences in their sports, such as how language differences impacted their ability to understand drills, communicate during competition with teammates, and connect with coaches. Sara shared, "It was hard to talk in the field at the beginning because I was used to - I'm the goalie. I was used to talking to my, like, team, but in Spanish." Paz said,

... the language in the field [was a challenge]. I don't know any words. I was- people were not yelling at me but trying to tell me, like, *pass* or *turn*...and it was like, 'I don't understand any of that words' hahaha... Yeah, it took me- Actually, the coach made the whole team write the principal words and I did the translation to Spanish.

Carla, a point guard, had a similar experience. She shared,

Sometimes, I'm like, 'What are you saying?' And then, they're like, 'What are you saying?' Uh, but I try ... I communicate a lot on the court and outside of the court, so I think people have gotten used to, like, understanding me and stuff.

Fifth, participants' transitions to U.S. schooling were easier, but the academic structure and learning in English was still a new experience. Due to the resources to which they were entitled through athletics and the integrative structure of U.S. college sport, participants commented that the academic load was somewhat easier to balance as a student-athlete in the U.S. For example, Pilar said,

...we don't get like as much support like we get here... like in Spain, if I have to skip class, because I am traveling, it's always gonna be a problem. If I was gonna miss an exam, they would not let me make it up, or anything.

Candi shared that although school was hard and time consuming, she found it especially rewarding when she was successful. She said,

There is a good team pressure that we have good grades, so you really have to do good... But here, doing readings... takes me like twice the time that it will take another friend here... Struggling with homework and everything... I feel like, 'Oh that's so much pressure.' But when I got things done, and I see that I get a good grade- and more than a good grade, but I learned... and even if it's 1:30 am or 2 am, and I got my things done, and I did a good job, I'm like... 'You're special, 'cause you're a student-athlete, and these are things that not most of the people do.' So, it's challenging, and you struggle, and you feel pressure, but the feeling when you get things done- it's amazing.

Living the Dream

A commonality among participants was their reason for coming to the U.S. for college. Amidst an atmosphere full of cultural adaptation and challenges, most participants agreed that coming to the U.S. to play a sport in college and gain proficiency in English was a dream, as the integrative structure of college sport and academics is unique to the U.S. and not an option for participants in their native countries. On getting recruited to be a DI student-athlete, Candi shared:

It was a dream. So in Colombia you either study or you are an athlete... So you have to choose if you wanna be an athlete or if you wanna be a good student... Here you have the chance to do both, and if you add, like, being able to speak English- another language- you're in the capital of the world in the United States, so that's something that you have to consider.

Additionally, resources that were available to athletes on college campuses were unlike any benefits they received on their countries' most elite amateur sport teams. While acknowledging that the demand of being a student-athlete was taxing, participants commented that resources and services made the experience feasible. Pilar said, "I just feel like we have- especially compared to Spain- like we have everything. I don't think there's anything I'm

missing." On the contrary, several participants mentioned that they did not know of or utilize resources available to them, or they did not consider the resources valuable as they could be. Sara said, "I mean he [academic advisor] tells me what to do, but I also have been figuring it out by my own how to get credits transferred from Chile."

The participants shared that they would change little about their overall experiences and rated their experiences highly; most opted to rate their experience on a scale from 1 to 10, and their answers ranged from seven to greater than 10. Álvaro, though still giving a high ranking to his experience said,

So all of this- all of this that I'm learning I think is pretty impressive, and so I would rate that with a high number, like maybe like eight or nine...But at the same time, I- could this be done better? Could I be happier than I am? Definitely. I cannot forget that what I'm learning is amazing and all of this, but...It's a tough life.

Marta shared,

I feel like I've learned a lot. I've grown a lot. I feel like I'm a different person... And having that transition, um, accepting that not everything goes the way you want. I feel like I've learned a lot and not only soccer-wise but also, well, the school-wise and personal. And I feel like I get to know who I am.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine international Hispanic's experiences as intercollegiate student-athletes. Results indicated that being an international Hispanic student athlete was a unique and challenging experience. In this section, results are connected to prior research with implications for practitioners working with this population.

Language was a prevalent element in how participants perceived their overall experience. While other differences across cultures and countries did not impede them from success in athletic, academic, or social matters, language was a primary obstacle. This central theme is consistent with research by Chun and Dickson (2011) who explained that difference in language is one of the most critical obstacles for Hispanics (regardless of being an athlete or international) in U.S. institutions. Although language likely would be a major challenge for any international student, immigrant, or non-native English speaker in a new culture, the language barrier was heightened for student-athletes as it inhibited their relationships and made their athletic interactions more complicated. This was most dominant in social experiences because often it prevented Hispanic student-athletes from engaging in relationships that they perceived as meaningful, especially relationships with teammates or others important to their athletic success. Since previous literature has deemed relationships as one of the most important cultural assets to Hispanics (Corona et al., 2017; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015), the language barrier prohibited most participants from achieving social connections to the same degree in the U.S. as they did in their own countries.

Participants' *bubbles* provided the support they needed to have positive holistic college athletic experiences, as if to replicate *familismo* and substitute for their strong family network in their home countries. Because *familismo* is dominant in Hispanic culture, the lack of a community- or relative-based network emphasized the need for Hispanic student-athletes to

develop this new social sphere at their institutions. Our results confirm that such connections are especially important for Hispanic ISAs accustomed to such support naturally. Delgado Bernal (2002) explained that maintaining family-like relationships is most critical for Hispanic student adjustment in college (regardless of being an athlete or international), and that students who have such relationships are more likely to graduate. Similarly, Kiyama et al. (2015) noted that *familisimo* can extend beyond a geographical community and create a family subculture in college that can contribute to retention and success for Hispanic college students. Though language differences added a layer of complexity to the relational and technical aspects of the sport itself, athletics also reduced the traditional difficulties that many Hispanic students face in college since the athletic team substituted for family to achieve *familismo*.

Ironically, the athlete-centered bubble that provides a sense of *familismo* can be seen as a contributing factor in imbalance because of minimal contact outside of the bubble. Many participants reported a struggle to maintain balance in their lives while at college and felt they were frequently in a state of imbalance. Minimized opportunity to develop relationships outside of athletics appeared to intensify their dependence on the athletic *bubble*. Some participants reported that their status as an athlete gave them a sense of belonging that they would not have felt otherwise as Hispanics at PWIs.

As a result of the bubble, building new relationships became a lower priority than in their home countries. Decreased levels of *disfrutando* appeared to be minimized by elevated commitment required by athletics at NCAA DI institutions. While participants had previously juggled athletic and academic demands in their native countries, many did not understand the extremity of their commitments prior to their start at NCAA Division I universities. Attempting to balance the demands of being a student-athlete (i.e., practices, travel, meetings, appointments) can lead to physical and mental exhaustion (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), but this is before the addition of variables associated with being Hispanic and an international student (Love & Kim, 2011; Pierce et al, 2011; Popp et al, 2009; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b). All indicated their identity as athletes *had* to be stronger in the U.S. due to the nature of U.S. intercollegiate sport, potentially contradicting their initial expectations.

Although imbalance existed in Hispanic student-athletes' lives, most participants shared an unequivocal desire to attend university in the U.S. and learn English, making the conflicts and challenges *worth it*. Findings in this study reinforced contentions from Pierce et al (2011) who reported that many ISAs would not have moved to the U.S. or continued sport participation if it were not for the opportunities, facilities, and resources available in U.S. intercollegiate sport. Not only are options in the U.S. generally superior to many facilities in their native countries, but the U.S. intercollegiate athletic system allows ISAs to achieve academically while competing and training at a high level athletically (Popp et al., 2010). Additionally, participants in the current study echoed that the resources, scholarships, and student-athlete support services were not options for them at home, and that these resources helped them to be successful amidst the conflicting demands of academics and athletics.

Interpretations and Culturally Responsive Recommendations

As prior Hispanic student-athlete research expresses the importance of intentional support groups (Guillaume & Trujillo, 2018; Martinez, 2018; Ortega, 2019; Turk et al., 2017), perhaps the best practical way to break the cycle of imbalance for Hispanic ISAs is by taking advantage of the bubble. This can promote early acquisition of necessary cultural capital to adjust, as ISAs'

first weeks and months are critical to successful adaptation (Jara-Pazmino et al., 2017). To enhance transitions for Hispanic ISAs the results in this study suggest that athletic department personnel may need to have unique understanding of individual minority groups rather than homogenizing athletes by racial group, sport, or academic risk. Resources such as academic advising, international student services, counseling, and English Language Learner (ELL) services already exist, and athletic departments can utilize these campus-wide resources to promote balance and cultural considerations. A specific member of the athletic department staff (perhaps the student-athlete's advisor) could monitor and support the Hispanic student-athlete's transition to U.S. intercollegiate athletics while simply serving as the facilitator in connecting student-athletes to existing resources on campus, providing links to the most well-resourced and highly trained officials in their specialized areas on campus (Pierce et al., 2011). This connection to resources can quicken the transition to U.S. college life.

Coaches, too, must develop increased responsibility for protecting their Hispanic ISAs. Pierce et al (2011) contend that many ISAs do not fully consider or understand the location, environment, and details of the specific school they might attend and sport team they would be part of. Prior to the Hispanic student-athlete's arrival on campus, coaches must understand that they are the primary source of information about the prospective university, athletic experience, and life in the U.S. for Hispanic student-athletes they are recruiting (Pierce et al, 2011; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). Jara-Pazmino et al.'s (2017) *custom coaching* model provides practical suggestions for building deeper relationships. Deep knowledge of the ISA's background (e.g., individual needs, personal values, motivation, knowledge of the NCAA) can help the coach connect with the ISA to promote the student-athlete's acclimation. Mentorship is important for ISAs' success, and pairing ISAs with upperclassmen teammates can introduce the new players to their roles as NCAA student-athletes and form an automatic network (Jara-Pazmino, 2017), forming the beginnings of a bubble for Hispanic ISAs.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study considered exclusively Hispanic ISAs. Future research should examine domestic Hispanic student-athletes for comparisons. This point is particularly relevant when considering the shifting U.S. demographics and growing Hispanic population (US Census Bureau, 2016). While some cultural considerations relative to Hispanic ISAs in this study might be relevant to domestic Hispanics, other factors are likely to be unique to this group. Additionally, future research should replicate the study in other divisions of intercollegiate sport. Division I FBS universities have the most resources, yet participants still indicated many challenges and un-serviced needs, suggesting that Hispanic student-athletes at DII, DIII, NAIA, or two-year institutions could face challenges with less support. Methodologically, subsequent research should consider case study methodology to explore the effect of support services available to international and/or Hispanic student-athletes or longitudinal studies to provide a more detailed summary of their experiences over time. Quantitative studies with generalizable research for predicting adjustment, measuring identity, or anticipating academic success also would be beneficial for athletic departments, coaches, and student-athletes.

Conclusion

Prior literature indicates that student-athletes face unique challenges due to conflicts among academic and athletic demands (Johnson et al., 2012; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Woodruff & Schallert, 2008). ISAs often encounter feelings of isolation due to cultural and linguistic differences and misconceptions of the student-athlete experience (Pierce et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine international Hispanics' experiences as intercollegiate student-athletes. The findings suggested that Hispanic ISAs face a variety of challenges when they enter NCAA Division I universities. The most dominant theme was language. However, the bubble served as transferrable cultural capital useful for closing the language barrier and navigating a dominant culture. Yet, imbalance still exists in Hispanic ISAs' lives due to discontinuity between the demands of being a DI intercollegiate student-athlete and their Hispanic cultural identities. While teammates currently provide a social bubble for Hispanic student-athletes and imitate *familismo*, athletic administrators and coaches have responsibilities for fostering a holistic experience - and combatting imbalance through more extensive support and intervention. It is clear that existing imbalance is a legitimate discrepancy in cultural capital that warrants attention from intercollegiate athletic departments.

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