Leaders beyond sport: an exploratory comparative analysis of international and domestic college athletes' leadership competencies

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership competencies of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) college athletes and assess the potential differences between domestic and international college athletes.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative, non-experimental research design was employed, including the use of an electronic survey to collect data. Survey research allows for extensive data management and a quick data collection method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey was conducted using online Qualtrics software, which allowed convenience in administration, maintenance, nationwide distribution and data export and analysis.

Findings – The findings of this study suggest that domestic college athletes develop greater leadership competencies than their international peers.

Practical implications – The study implications include both practical and academic contributions. The research in the area of leadership development in college athletes has been growing. Previous research has focused on the benefits of the leadership development (Lewis, 2023); however, minimal research has been dedicated to exploring actual leadership constructs within the college athlete population. Moreover, this study focused on the differences between domestic and international college athletes' leadership constructs. International college athletes go through additional challenges while balancing the academic part of being college athletes (Ridpath, Rudd, & Stokowski, 2020).

Originality/value – Minimal research has been dedicated to exploring actual leadership constructs within the student-athlete population. This study is the first study that explored leadership constructs from the quantitative lens and focusing on both domestic and international student-athletes. The literature on international student-athletes mainly focuses on the motivation arriving to the United States of America (Love & Kim, 2011) and their transitional experiences (Popp, Pierce, & Hums, 2011; Jolly, Stokowski, Paule-Koba, Arthur-Banning, & Fridley, 2022). However, limited literature focuses on the preparation of international student-athlete for life beyond their sport.

Keywords Leadership development, College athletics, NCAA, Athlete development

Paper type Research paper

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) strives to cultivate a "world-class athletics and academic experience…that fosters lifelong well-being" (NCAA, n.d.a, b, para. 1). To this, the NCAA provides athletes with leadership initiatives designed to enhance the leadership competencies of college athletes (Kruse, 2021). While the fundamental mission and intentions of NCAA leadership development programs are notable, the distinct differences between college athletes present challenges to the implementation of meaningful leadership development programming.

Considering the structural diversity of the NCAA and, correspondingly, athlete participants, the experiential satisfaction and value of NCAA athletics participation vary (Harry, 2021). For instance, athletes participating in Division III athletics receive no athletic grant-in-aid (i.e. athletic scholarship) and participate in more regional-based athletic competitions than their counterparts in Division I (Huml, 2018). Such structural differences, given the NCAA's unique governance model and differing operating guidelines for each divisional classification, lend themself to the distinct experiences of NCAA athletes themselves. In addition to structural differences, the vast diversity of participants in NCAA athletics in terms of general demography makes en masse programmatic development difficult. A growing trend in NCAA athletics that exemplifies the drastically different demographic factors between athlete participants is the number of international athletes competing in NCAA athletics.

As of 2024, more than 25,228 international athletes currently compete in NCAA athletics (NCAA, n.d.a). Unlike any other organization in the world, the NCAA provides an opportunity for athletes to pursue athletic and academic careers simultaneously. Accordingly, many international athletes are attracted to this opportunity cultivated by and within NCAA athletic competition (Popp *et al.*, 2011; Stokowski, Huffman, & Aicher, 2013). Although the NCAA states they are committed to holistic athlete development, catering to the diverse needs of both domestic and international athletes presents challenges. Given the various transitionary and adjustment difficulties unique to international college athletes (e.g. language, cultural and familial) (Jolly *et al.*, 2022), international college athletes may be reluctant to seek leadership opportunities. As leadership skills cultivated through sport and athletics participation are transferrable in the context of personal and professional career competency, the need for programmatic initiatives to assist college athletes – both domestic and international – in developing leadership competencies is of vital importance in actualizing the holistic development central to the NCAA's mission (Cotterill, Loughead, & Fransen, 2022; Lewis, 2023; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

While extant research has examined the experiential satisfaction and value of NCAA athletic participation (Beattie & Turner, 2022; Harry, 2021; Trendafilova, Hardin, Kim, & Seungmo, 2010), research exploring the leadership competencies of college athletes remains scarce. Considering the NCAA's emphasis on leadership development (Kruse, 2021; NCAA, n.d.b), research seeking to identify the actualized outcomes of such leadership competencies among college athletes is of unique value in contextualizing the role of NCAA athletics participation on leadership development and competency. Considering the growing number of international athletes competing in NCAA athletics, the needs and leadership characteristics of domestic and international college athletes should be considered when formulating athlete development and leadership programming. The present study sought to explore the existent differences between the leadership competencies of domestic and international athletes currently competing in NCAA athletics. The researchers aimed to examine the distinct leadership competencies of domestic and international college athletics to further aid athletic administrators in developing holistic programming to meet the demands of both domestic and international athletes.

Literature review

Implicit leadership theory

Implicit leadership theory posits that human behaviors, characteristics and traits form a foundation of leadership perception (Vogel, Reichard, Batistič, & Černe, 2021). Followers use implicit leadership theory to identify leaders daily (Schyns & Schilling, 2011). According to Schyns and Schilling (2011), individuals perceive leaders differently, often selecting leaders based on their previous perceptions of leadership behaviors. In this context, followers are the ones who play a crucial role in recognizing leaders within the group.

While some individuals may possess natural leadership characteristics, others develop leadership skills through their environment or participation in leadership programming (Heim, Stokowski, Springer, & Rubin, 2022; Vogel et al., 2021). However, a leader's perception remains essential to the implicit leadership theory. If followers' perspectives of a leader do not align with their leadership actions, then they might not be willing to follow this leader (Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, & Hansbrough, 2020). Therefore, the perception of the implicit leader is typically shaped by the surrounding members through comparison with their pre-existing beliefs and attributes of leaders (Schyns & Schilling, 2011; Vogel et al., 2021). It should be noted that these concepts are not only used by followers, but individuals in leadership positions can also access their leadership constructs (Lord et al., 2020).

In the context of this study, college athletes are often regarded as born, assigned or developed leaders based on their environment. However, college athletes frequently experience increased confidence when placed in leadership roles by their coaches or peers (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). College athletes gain confidence in their leadership skills when exposed to leadership positions or explicit programming. This aligns with the implicit theory, which evaluates the cognitive perception of leaders, leadership and their environment (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Given the nature of college athletes' unique experiences based on various social scenarios (being a part of a team, developing relationships with coaches and teammates), implicit leadership theory provides the lens to understand how these surroundings shape their perceptions of a leader, specifically within themselves.

Athlete development

Higher education institutions aim to assist students in developing into leaders who take on real-life challenges (Dugan & Komives, 2007). During their academic journey, students are often in self-exploration, focusing on personal development with professional goals in mind (Brougham, Taylor, Huml, Kloetzer, & Wells, 2023). To promote student development, universities offer many programs, including extracurricular activities, Greek life and athletics (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

The NCAA (2023) positions its mission to provide athletes with optimal athletic and academic experiences. Wright and Côté (2003) found that college athletes develop leadership skills through sports participation, specifically skill development, work ethic, sport knowledge and rapport with people. However, some skills gained from sports participation are not transferable to future careers (Stokowski, Paule-Koba, & Kaunert, 2019). Many college athletes face time constraints, hindering their development beyond sport (Stokowski et al., 2019). College athletes often struggle to balance their athletic and academic endeavors and battle to find extra time to further enhance their social, professional and personal development (Stokowski et al., 2019; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). Moreover, some college athletes experience a negative transition out of their sport (Stokowski et al., 2019) and unpreparedness for their careers (Navarro, 2013). This is commonly seen in athletes who psychologically identify as athletes over considering the future outside of the sport (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Therefore, there is a need for college athletes to explore themselves outside of their sport.

Most athletes are appointed into leadership roles (e.g. team captain) by their coaches based on their athletic abilities or the class standings (e.g. senior), disregarding other athletes who might have natural leadership competencies outside of their athletic skills (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). However, college teams often experience high overturns that could limit the number of leaders on the team (Weaver & Simet, 2015). Therefore, coaches believe there is a need for multiple individuals to guide and keep the team together (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Leadership development in the college athlete population has been shown to positively impact interactions with peers, participation in learning services, development of self-efficacy and ability to lead others (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

Despite limited time, in order to assist in the leadership development of college athletes, the athletic department should offer programming to facilitate the development of this population (Navarro, Rubin, & Mamerow, 2020; Lewis, 2023). Leadership programming involves group activities, mentorship opportunities and workshops (Lewis, 2023). The Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC) is one of the NCAA's initial programs that were offered to college athletes. One of the benefits of SAAC is that it is already positioned in the institution and supported by the NCAA (O'Brien *et al.*, 2021; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). The SAAC provides athletes the opportunity to offer insight into their experiences and make sure the college athlete population's voices are heard (NCAA, 2023). The SAAC allows college athletes to step into leadership positions, transfer skills learned through their sport to a professional setting and develop beyond their sport (Heim *et al.*, 2022; Navarro *et al.*, 2020). Though athletic departments provide valuable development options for college athletes through programming like SAAC, there is limited research focused on the leadership competencies exhibited by current college athletes.

Participation in traditional college athlete-focused leadership programs has been found to positively influence career development, career maturity and identity exploration (Heim *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, while there is certainly a need for more leadership opportunities and programs designed to develop college athletes beyond their sport (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021), there should also be a focus on diverse backgrounds and perspectives, including those of international college athletes. However, previous research has not explored the leadership characteristics of domestic or international college athletes through a quantitative lens.

International student leadership development

Students from around the world come to the United States of America (USA) to pursue educational opportunities (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, & Huang, 2009). International students must overcome challenges in order to adjust to their new environment. In addition to traditional challenges (e.g. language barriers, cultural barriers and new environment), international students reported feeling less confident than domestic students regarding campus involvement (Collier, Rosch, & Houston, 2017). Even though international students bring many advantages (e.g. cultural diversity and economics), universities must assist international students in acclimating to life in the USA (Georges & Chen, 2018).

Studies have explored the transitional experiences of international students (Mamiseishvili, 2012; Nguyen, 2016) as well as the immigration patterns of international students that occur post-graduation (Han, Stocking, Gebbie, & Appelbaum, 2015). International students often need help finding themselves and belonging on campus, a lack of which can lead to dissatisfaction with the institution or decreased career preparation (Rivas, Burke, & Hale, 2019). International student involvement on campus correlates to social development, personal growth and improved academic performance (Astin, 1994).

Previous literature has shown that association with the intercollegiate sports team created a sense of belonging for international students on campus, leading to academic satisfaction (Koo, Sung, & Martinez, 2015; Kim, Stokowski, Lo, & Han, 2022). Moreover, Kim *et al.* (2022)

found college sports allowed international students to meet people and build relationships on campus. Given the rise of international students on campus, scholars emphasized the importance of understanding factors affecting the adjustment of international students and how it could improve the experience of this specific population (Georges & Chen, 2018). However, the literature does not explore leadership development and their experiences, presenting a notable gap (Astin, 1994).

Georges and Chen (2018) explored international graduate student leadership in the USA. The participants reported that leadership programming helped them to develop valuable skills and improve their personal and professional networks (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Georges & Chen, 2018). Moreover, faculty and peer mentorship programs contributed to the leadership development of international students (Shalka, Corcoran, & Magee, 2019). Collier et al. (2017) compared international and domestic students' self-reported leadership skills, efficacy, social justice awareness and motivation to lead pre- and post-leadership training. Collier and Rosch (2016) found that post-training international and domestic students were similar in all areas, except for transformation leadership, where domestic students were significantly higher. Likewise, the more in-depth analysis indicated that international students gain more leadership skills than domestic students but feel less confident acting upon them (Collier et al., 2017). Therefore, proper leadership programming is needed to help international students practice those leadership skills in an organizational setting, allowing them to step into those leadership roles more comfortably.

However, it should be noted that developing leadership skills predicts overall success and satisfaction with the academic journey (Nguyen, 2016). Therefore, involvement in extracurricular activities such as leadership development programming leads to increased satisfaction and preparation for future career plans (Georges & Chen, 2018; Yoh & Pedersen, 2006). Leadership development programming for international students is often ignored, as programming tends to focus on initial first-year transition and language improvement courses (Collier et al., 2017; Newell, 2015). Providing leadership opportunities for international students can assist this population in adjusting to their campus communities and in career preparation (Nguyen, 2016).

International athlete leadership development

College athletes often struggle to balance their time commitment between sports and academics (Stokowski et al., 2019). For international college athletes, cultural acclimatization is an additional stressor (Ridpath et al., 2020). Studies have explored the international college athletes' motivations coming to the USA (e.g. Love & Kim, 2011) and initial transition (e.g. Jolly et al., 2022). Research indicated that international college athletes often rely on the support of their teammates and coaches (Jolly et al., 2022; Popp, Love, Kim, & Hums, 2010). Similarly, Popp, Hums and Greenwell (2009) found that international college athletes often need to understand the university offerings during recruitment and often rely on their coaches for this information. Still, institutional support is crucial for an overall positive experience (Jolly et al., 2022; Newell, 2015).

Furthermore, some international college athletes hope to remain in the USA after graduation. Jolly et al. (in progress) found that skills learned through sport participation positively influenced the future careers of international college athletes. Foster and Lally's (2021) study highlighted the negative perceptions of being an international college athlete, as their study found those who did not pursue sports careers or play professionally regretted participating in intercollegiate athletics due to the time commitment. This aligns with Popp et al.'s (2010) exploration, indicating that international college athletes scored lower on competitiveness, viewing intercollegiate sport as an opportunity of self-exploration (Popp et al., 2009). Unfortunately, international college athletes often lack the ability for career

exploration due to visa restrictions (Solomon, Jolly, Stokowski, Ehrlich, & Arthur-Banning, 2022).

While programming strives to enhance the college athlete experience (Navarro *et al.*, 2020), there is currently a lack of programming explicitly dedicated to the unique needs of international college athletes (Newell, 2015). While Foster and Lally (2021) found that international college athletes learn leadership skills through sports participation, research focused on accessing leadership competencies in the college athlete population is scarce. Leadership programming is valuable in preparing college athletes for life beyond sports, as it teaches them how to apply the skills learned and facilitate their adjustment to life after sport. As highlighted previously, participation in leadership programming for both domestic and international college athletes leads to personal growth, satisfaction with their college experiences and better career preparation (Georges & Chen, 2018; Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

For international college athletes specifically, engagement in leadership programming would not only aid in career preparation but also provide an opportunity to gain confidence in their leadership skills and cultural adjustment to the USA (Jolly *et al.*, 2022; Ridpath *et al.*, 2020). Leadership programming can aid domestic and international college athletes in the ability to transfer those leadership skills to assist in career preparation and growth (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021). Therefore, additional research is needed to highlight the leadership skills of international college athletes and recognize the differences between domestic and international populations. The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership competencies of NCAA college athletes and assess the potential differences between domestic and international college athletes. Specifically, this study strived to address the following research questions to guide data collection and analysis:

RQ1. What are the critical leadership competencies exhibited by domestic and international NCAA athletes?

RQ2. Is there a significant difference in leadership competencies between domestic and international college athletes?

Methodology
Research design
A quantitative, non-experimental research design was employed, including the use of an electronic survey to collect data. Survey research allows for extensive data management and a quick data collection method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey was conducted using online Qualtrics software, which allowed convenience in administration, maintenance, nationwide distribution and data export and analysis.

Sample
This study recruited current NCAA college athletes using purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was selected, as it allowed for the recruitment of a specific population based on preferred characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample included current NCAA international and domestic college athletes across all member institutions. Additionally, snowball sampling supports purposive sampling in reaching a more significant number of participants. Snowball sampling allowed us to recruit additional participants using the current college athletes' network, such as asking college athletes to contact their friends at other institutions.

Both sampling methods assisted researchers in recruiting the desired number of participants. The survey was collected electronically and distributed to the participants via email for their convenience. The anticipated limitation was the sample size overall. However,

we predicted that the number of international college athletes will be much smaller than domestic college athletes. Therefore, snowball sampling was necessary to archive the desired number of participants and maximize a significant representation of both groups.

Ethical consideration

Before conducting the study, the primary researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [Blinded for Review] University (Protocol #202308010). Then, the email detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participation and Qualtrics link was sent to the potential participants and the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) for distribution. The participants were asked to read an informed consent form as the survey's first question and were given the option to continue by pressing the "Next" button. Respondents were permitted to withdraw at any time without consequence.

The utilized research instrument aimed to assess the leadership competencies of international and domestic college athletes. The survey included 28 questions and took approximately 5–15 minutes to complete. While the participants' demographics were collected, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were protected by not collecting their names or schools. Data are stored on a password-protected computer and accessible by the primary researcher only. Complying with federal law, the data will be destroyed after five years.

Research instrument

The survey consisted of 13 demographic questions (e.g. gender race, athletic classification [Divisions I, II and III], sport classification and international college athlete) and utilized the Leadership Learning Agility Scale (LLAS) (Bouland-van Dam, Oostrom, & Jansen, 2022) and the Student Leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS) (Kimura, Tateno, Matsui, & Nakahara, 2022). Bouland-van Dam *et al.* (2022) developed the LLAS, measuring learning agility (e.g. achievement motivation, extraversion and conscientiousness). The LLAS consisted of 18 items and 3 dimensions (i.e. developing leadership, seeking feedback and development systematically) on a 5-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "agree"). The LLAS has shown internal consistency reliability of Cronbach's alpha ranges (0.81–0.89). Originally focused on the workplace, scale items were modified to fit the context of the college athlete population. For example, the item stated as "I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our project goals" was modified to "I put effort in getting better in influencing others to reach our team goals."

The SLBS measured (Kimura *et al.*, 2022) students' leadership behaviors. It included 30 items with 6 leadership constructs (i.e. taking initiative and modeling the way, challenging the process, sharing goals, managing goals and tasks, task-oriented support and people-oriented support). Each question is answered on a five-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "agree"). Cronbach's alpha indicated reliability, with a consistency coefficient of 0.74–0.84. Like the LLAS, the SLBS was modified for the college athlete population.

The entire scale underwent pilot testing with former college athletes to provide construct validity to the survey. Pilot tests helped determine if the content and questions were well understood, specifically the administration process for the specific population (Bouland-van Dam *et al.*, 2022).

Analysis

To answer the specific research questions, several statistical analyses were used. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software. As a first step, the descriptive statistics were

analyzed for means and frequencies based on demographic questions. Internal reliability for validation was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha before analyzing the data to answer research questions. After the internal validity was confirmed, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to answer the second research question. Specifically, one-way ANOVA Welch's test was used, as it is particularly suited when the group sizes are unequal.

To answer the second question, the means of leadership competency scores between international and domestic college athletes were compared. The independent variable is international or domestic college athlete group difference. The dependent variables include leadership competencies measured using the LLAS and SLBS scales (developing leadership, seeking feedback and development systematically, taking initiative and modeling the way, challenging the process, sharing goals, managing goals and tasks, task-oriented support and people-oriented support).

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership competencies of the NCAA college athletes and assess the potential differences between domestic and international college athletes. A quantitative, non-experimental survey design was used to address the study's purpose. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA were conducted to answer the research questions.

The first research question asked was: What are the critical leadership competencies exhibited by domestic and international NCAA athletes? Using descriptive statistics, data from college athletes ($N = 243$) were analyzed. A summary of the findings from the descriptive statistical analysis for the study identifying the participants' gender, race, division of participation and international or domestic status can be found in Table 1 below. As shown in Table 1, there was a significant disparity between international ($n = 39$) and domestic ($n = 204$) college athletes.

Before the one-way ANOVA analysis, the internal reliability of the responses to survey items associated with the leadership factors was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha (α). The

	n	%
Gender		
Male	93	38.3%
Female	150	61.7%
Race		
White	196	80.7%
Black or African American	22	9.1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.4%
Asian	5	2.1%
Other	17	7.0%
NCAA classification		
Division I	61	25.1%
Division II	148	60.9%
Division III	34	14.0%
International college athlete		
Yes	39	16.0%
No	204	84.0%
Source(s): Table by authors		

Table 1.
Descriptive frequencies and percentages by gender, race, NCAA division and status

internal reliability of 48 survey items (leadership constructs) was excellent at $\alpha = 0.97$, with Factor 1: developing leadership at $\alpha = 0.91$ and Factor 2: seeking feedback at $\alpha = 0.93$, indicating excellent levels. The remaining factors showed internal reliability at a good level, all above $\alpha > 0.8$.

A one-way ANOVA was used to answer RQ2: Is there a difference between international and domestic college athletes in leadership constructs? More specifically, Welch's one-way ANOVA was used due to the robustness against unbalanced sample sizes (domestic $= 204$ and international $= 39$). Domestic college athletes scored higher than international college athletes on most of their leadership constructs. Specifically, all leadership factor scores were significantly different except for one.

The results of Welch's test for each factor (Table 2) and the descriptive means between the groups (Table 3) are demonstrated. A statistically significant difference in mean scores was found in Factor 1: developing leadership $F(1, 44) = 16.91$, $p < 0.001$, between domestic college athletes ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.64$) and international athletes ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.99$). Domestic college athletes scored significantly higher on Factor 2: seeking feedback, $F(1, 43) = 14.57$, $p < 0.001$ (domestic: $M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.64$, international: $M = 3.78$ and $SD = 1.10$). A statistically significant difference was noted in Factor 3: developing systematically $F(1, 45) = 8.98$, $p = 0.004$, where domestic college athletes' ($M = 4.17$ and $SD = 0.69$) mean score was higher than international college athletes ($M = 3.70$ and $SD = 0.92$). Domestic college athletes scored significantly higher ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.64$) than international college athletes ($M = 3.77$, SD $= 0.93$) in taking initiative and modeling the way. Sharing goals, $F(1, 45) = 8.48$, $p = 0.006$, managing goals and tasks, $F(1, 48) = 9.61$, $p = 0.003$ (domestic:

	df	F	p
Factor 1: Developing leadership	44.59	16.9	<0.001*
Factor 2: Seeking feedback	43.33	14.57	<0.001*
Factor 3: Developing systematically	45.58	8.98	0.004*
Taking initiative and modeling the way	45.52	11.10	0.002*
Challenging the process	45.18	3.85	0.056
Sharing goals	45.78	8.42	0.006*
Managing goals and tasks	48.15	9.16	0.003*
Task-oriented support	39.40	5.93	0.02*
People-oriented support	43.95	8.76	0.005*
Source(s): Table by authors			

Table 2.
Summary of one-way
ANOVA Welch's test

	International			Domestic		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Factor 1: Developing leadership	39	3.60	0.99	193	4.28	0.64
Factor 2: Seeking feedback	39	3.78	1.10	191	4.47	0.64
Factor 3: Developing systematically	38	3.70	0.92	193	4.17	0.69
Taking initiative and modeling the way	39	3.77	0.93	190	4.30	0.64
Challenging the process	38	3.98	0.91	189	4.28	0.66
Sharing goals	38	3.77	0.97	184	4.25	0.72
Managing goals and tasks	38	3.66	0.87	188	4.18	0.73
Task-oriented support	34	3.96	0.94	187	4.36	0.67
People-oriented support	37	4.01	0.88	184	4.45	0.64
Source(s): Table by authors						

Table 3.
Means and standard
deviations and for one-
way ANOVA

$M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.63$, international: $M = 3.66$ and $SD = 0.87$), task-oriented support, $F(1, 39) = 5.93$, $p = 0.02$ (domestic: $M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.67$, international: $M = 3.96$ and $SD = 0.94$) and people-oriented support, $F(1, 44) = 8.76$, $p = 0.005$ (domestic: $M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.64$, international: $M = 4.01$ and $SD = 0.88$) were all statistically significant between the two groups of international and domestic college athletes. The only leadership factor score that was not statistically and significantly different between domestic ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.66$) and international ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.91$) college athletes was challenging the process, $F(1, 45) = 3.85$ and $p = 0.056$.

Discussion

The study investigated the leadership constructs in the college athletes, focusing on leadership constructs of domestic and international college athletes. The participants answered various demographic questions, which were analyzed using frequencies. The results of the frequency investigation outline that the majority of respondents were female (61.7%), White (80.75%) and Division II (69.0%) college athletes. Most respondents also noted their domestic status (84%).

Second, to answer RQ1 and RQ2, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the critical leadership constructs for the college athlete population and whether domestic and international college athletes differ in their leadership competencies. The one-way ANOVA, specifically the Welch's one-way ANOVA, indicated a significant difference in leadership competencies of domestic and international college athletes in eight out of nine factors: (1) developing leadership, which suggests domestic athletes are more agreeable to seeking out and putting effort into developing leadership skills in a social context (Yukl, 2012); (2) seeking feedback, where domestic students indicated a higher likelihood of seeking out and accepting feedback from others in order to shift their behaviors (De Meuse, 2017); (3) developing systematically, which highlights the agreeableness of domestic athletes to pursue opportunities where they engage in informal learning to develop excellence (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014); (4) taking Initiative and modeling the way, where domestic students were more agreeable to taking on leadership roles and acting as exemplary group members (Kimura *et al.*, 2022); (5) sharing goals, where domestic students were more likely to inspire teammates by offering mutual objectives (Kimura *et al.*, 2022); (6) managing goals and tasks, which suggests domestic students set goals and plans for goal management and attainment more strongly than international students; (7) task-oriented support, where domestic students focus on group performance and supporting member skill growth (Kimura *et al.*, 2022) and (8) people-oriented support, where domestic students are more agreeable to developing relationships between teammates to maintain group effectiveness (Kimura *et al.*, 2022). The only factor that did not differ significantly was challenging the process, where domestic *and* international students indicated slight agreeableness with taking on challenges that may be difficult (Kimura *et al.*, 2022).

The study results suggest that domestic college athletes possess higher leadership skills or abilities than their international peers. They are streaming from the cultural differences, experiences and access to leadership programming. However, the literature on leadership development has not explored the differences between domestic and international college athletes, making it harder to validate the findings of this study. Cross-cultural leadership warrants further exploration as international college athletes often perceive leadership differently based on their social upbringing than domestic college athletes (Cotterill *et al.*, 2022).

The study's findings on the two factors: developing leadership and seeking feedback, align with previous research highlighting the unique challenges international college athletes face when transitioning to the USA (Jolly *et al.*, 2022). International college athletes often rely on coaches for leadership rather than their peers since coaches are the ones who recruit them

to come to the USA (Popp *et al.*, 2009). They often prioritize their initial adjustment to the new environment rather than seeking new leadership roles or peer feedback (Popp *et al.*, 2010, 2011). The lack of structured leadership programming (Newell, 2015), visa restrictions (Solomon *et al.*, 2022) and time commitments tied to college athletes often limit their leadership development. Thus, international college athletes scored lower on factors like developing leadership and seeking feedback may be attributed to the initial adjustments of international college athletes to the new environment.

The differences were found in factors like goal sharing, taking initiative and modeling the way and sharing goals, as domestic college athletes scored significantly higher than their international peers. These findings contribute to previous research that domestic college athletes are motivated by winning and are more confident in their skills than their international peers (Popp *et al.*, 2009). International college athletes often want to pursue a particular career, but it might not align with the team's goals (Navarro, 2013), which could explain the difference. Thus, the motivations, graduation plans and cultural background of both domestic and international college athletes affect their understanding and approach to leadership development and transfer of skills (Collier *et al.*, 2017; Lewis, 2023).

Task-oriented support and people-oriented support were found to be statistically significant between the two groups. Cultural differences in exposure to different sporting systems might contribute to group differences (Cotterill *et al.*, 2022). Other cultures often perceive leadership differently, contributing to group differences (Popp *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, leadership perception is frequently formed by previous experiences and experimental learning (Vogel *et al.*, 2021). While in our study, international college athletes scored lower on eight leadership factors than domestic college athletes, one factor was not significant. The only leadership factor that did not differ significantly was challenging the process. The lack of difference suggests that both groups are driven and persistent in achieving their athletic goals as a part of their college athlete identity.

While the differences were observed in this study between most leadership factors in domestic and international college athletes, it highlights the need for leadership programming that addresses the unique needs of the international college athlete population. Specifically, it should address the cultural differences, transitional experiences and challenges faced by this population. By providing the support needed for international college athletes, institutions can better support the holistic development of those athletes on and off the court, as well as better prepared for the future beyond sport. Thus, creating support for international college athletes will promote the diversity and retention of those students.

Limitations and conclusion
While this study adds to the literature on leadership development, specifically international college athletes, the study did face some limitations. Traditionally, doing research with college athletes is difficult; thus, most studies are qualitative in nature or have a low sample size (Foster, Springer, & Harry, 2022). There are currently 526,084 college athletes participating at NCAA membership institutions and 25,228 (4.779%) are international (NCAA, n.d.a). This study included domestic ($n = 204$) and international ($n = 39$) college athlete participants, with international athletes accounting for 16% of the total sample. While the total sample size should be viewed as a limitation, it is worth noting that international college athletes make up less than 5% of all NCAA athletes. Thus, the representation of international college athletes in the present study, where they account for 16% of the total participants, is substantial.

Due to the quantitative nature of the study, another limitation is that the self-reported responses on the survey might have affected the study's outcome. Self-reported bias and perception of leadership in both domestic and international college athletes may not fully

capture their leadership competencies. Specifically, international college athletes' responses could have been modified based on their country of origin, years in the USA and the sport played.

Therefore, future research could focus on the specific career goals of college athletes to find if the differences between leadership skills lie in their motivation. Moreover, considering the country of origin and sports played could contribute to the leadership perceptions and development of international college athletes. Diving deeper into understanding how leadership perception affects leadership development could improve or hinder their development for life after sport.

The study implications include both practical and academic contributions. The research in the area of leadership development in college athletes has been growing. Previous research has focused on the benefits of leadership development (Lewis, 2023); however, minimal research has been dedicated to exploring actual leadership constructs within the college athlete population. Moreover, this study focused on the differences between domestic and international college athletes' leadership constructs. International college athletes go through additional challenges while balancing the academic part of being college athletes (Ridpath et al., 2020). International college athletes often feel homesick in acculturation to the new environment and language (Popp et al., 2009). Our findings provide evidence that international college athletes differentiate from domestic college athletes. Thus, there is a need to account for international college athletes' specific needs when creating programming for leadership development. To develop effective programming for the college athlete population, an array of factors should be considered, starting with understanding the college athletes' leadership competencies and the experiences of international college athletes. This study specifically investigated the leadership competencies of both domestic and international college athletes to develop the knowledge further. Leadership programming has implications for the college athlete population, as it has benefitted them during their time in college (e.g. in their sport and within the team) and plays an additional role in development beyond the sport and preparation for future careers (Rubin & Nwosu, 2021).

College athletes often dedicate all their time to academics and athletics, leaving no room for valuable professional development for the preparation for life beyond the sport (Stokowski et al., 2019). College athletes often gain leadership skills through sports participation (Lewis, 2023), but some of the skills are not transferable to their future careers. The literature on international college athletes mainly focuses on the motivation for arriving in the USA (Love and Kim, 2011) and their transitional experiences (Popp et al., 2011; Jolly et al., 2022). However, limited literature focuses on the preparation of international college athletes for life beyond their sport. International college athletes, as high-skilled employees, often assist universities in athletic achievements (Weston, 2006), bring financial and cultural benefits to the campus and contribute to the workforce (Han et al., 2015). The focus of the study was to explore the differences between domestic and international college athletes to develop further knowledge of the international college athlete population in the USA. Universities, athletic departments and coaches take the time and invest the funding into recruiting international college athletes to join their respective intuitions. Thus, it is important to understand the specific needs of the current population to make their experiences positive.

The number of international college athletes participating in the NCAA member institution comprises only 4.79% of all current college athletes (NCAA, n.d.a). However, the international college athlete population is growing on an early basis (NCAA, n.d.a). Therefore, international college athletes' leadership competencies and preparation for life beyond sport should not be overlooked. This study explored the leadership constructs of domestic and international college athletes to highlight the differences and the importance of leadership development. Domestic college athletes scored higher on all the leadership factors than international college athletes, except for one factor. Even though no specific research

previously focused on the leadership difference between international and domestic college athletes, literature has explored the lack of leadership programming available for the college athlete population. Specifically, currently, minimal programming is available for the college athlete population to develop outside of the sport (Lewis, 2023). Therefore, by creating programming that would fit the unique needs of international college athletes, intuitions would not only improve the experience of those athletes but also cultivate their development into leaders in their professional careers beyond sport.

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