

Unified: Establishing a Special Olympics College Club through Classroom Instruction

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Abstract

Unified Sports is a program through the Special Olympics in which athletes with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) have the opportunity to play sports and socialize with students who do not have an ID (Zhang et al., 2022). Introduced in 1988, Unified Sports is either embedded within a high school or university environment and is typically student-led (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). However, there can be many challenges with the initial creation of a Unified Sports program and how to keep it sustainable for future generations of students (Hassan et al., 2012).

This manuscript employed an autoethnography in which the primary author used self-reflection to focus on how sport management professors can create an experience within their classrooms to facilitate the formation of a Unified Special Olympics College Club (Ellis et al., 2011). In addition to the primary author's self-reflection, the autoethnography incorporated an interview with a Special Olympics representative to better understand how to implement a Unified sports program on a college campus.

This research focused on experiential learning and showcased how sport management faculty can work with a nonprofit organization to build an inclusive and diverse experience through education, collaboration, and community outreach. This research serves as a guide for future sport management programs looking to build partnerships with a nonprofit entity and establishes the Unified Model for a Sport Event Management Course (UMSEMC) to help sport management instructors hoping to partner with the Special Olympics.

Keywords: Unified Sports, Special Olympics, sport management, experiential learning, intellectual disabilities (ID), sport event management

Plain Language Summary

- Unified Sports is a program through the Special Olympics in which athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID) have the opportunity to play sports and socialize with students who do not have an intellectual disability (Zhang et al., 2022).

- **What we did in this study:** The primary author used self-reflection to focus on how Sport Management professors can create an experience within their classroom to facilitate the formation of a Unified Special Olympics College Club (Ellis et al., 2011).
- **Findings:** This research showcased how Sport Management faculty can work with a non-profit organization to build an inclusive and diverse experience through education, collaboration, and community outreach.
- **Conclusion:** This study provides context for how a university can provide a destination for athletes with ID to have an opportunity to meet and interact with members of a local campus community. It also serves as a guide for future Sport Management programs looking to build partnerships.

The Special Olympics were founded in the 1960s, beginning as Camp Shriver (Special Olympics, 2022). Camp Shriver came about when one parent of a child with an intellectual disability (ID) voiced a concern that a camp could not be found for a person with an ID. The original camp meeting consisted of 34 students and 26 camp counselors. Since that initial meeting, millions have participated in Special Olympics worldwide. The first Special Olympic games were held in Chicago in 1968, and since that time, there has been an increased awareness of ID and a movement towards societal inclusion. One aspect of the Special Olympics that is seen as paramount is the increase in the healthiness and wellness of Special Olympic athletes that began in the 1990s. Special Olympic events are held regularly around the world, culminating in alternating winter and summer games every two years (Special Olympics, 2022). Historically, athletes with ID played and competed with athletes who had similar intellectual restraints; however, this changed in the 1980s with the beginning of Unified Sports.

Unified Sports is a program through the Special Olympics in which athletes with ID have the opportunity to play sports and socialize with individuals who do not have an ID (Castagno, 2001). The goal of Unified Sports is to bring a diverse group of people together through the act of play. About 1.4 million people around the world take part in Unified Sports. Participants include Unified Athletes, who are Special Olympians who have an ID, or Unified Partners, individuals who do not have an ID (Montasano, 2013).

Traditionally, Unified Sports has been housed under Special Olympics College Clubs to function as an on-campus student organization through Campus Recreation. The Special Olympics assists university student organizations by providing an instructional guide to help students on a college campus create a College Club in order to host continuous Unified sporting events (Unified Sports, 2022). The Special Olympics has a guide for universities looking to implement a Unified program. The guide was created to assist in making the process seamless and straightforward. However, multiple variables play a role in having Unified Sports on a college campus and ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge and resources to plan and facilitate a Unified sporting event that is not included in the guide provided by Special Olympics. Equipping students means educating Unified Partners, building relationships on and off campus, and receiving institutional support from one's university.

This study gives a broader perspective on establishing a Unified Sports program on a college campus through institutional support, relationship building, and educating students on event planning and working with people with ID from an administrative perspective. This study is based on observations, lived experiences, and conversations with a representative from the Special Olympics.

Unified Sports

Unified Sports is an extension of Special Olympics which focuses on athletes with ID playing sports with individuals without an ID. Previous research involving Unified Sports has mainly focused on social inclusion (Dowling et al., 2010; Harada et al., 2011; Hassan et al., 2012; McConkey & Menke, 2022; Wilski et al., 2012; Yin et al., 2022) and the physical benefits of sport participation with those involved with Unified Sports (Baran et al., 2013; Block & Moon, 1992; Marks et al., 2010). Wilski et al. (2012) used qualitative interview methods and found that Unified Sports positively impacted athletes and provided many opportunities for personal growth. Townsend and Hassell (2007) focused on students and how their attitudes changed working with athletes with ID, based on age and gender, surveying the affective and cognitive components of 170 primary and secondary school students in New Zealand. In comparison, Phytanza et al. (2018) used the sport of soccer to look at how Unified improved life skills through tasks, rules, socialization, and physical education through qualitative data collection. Özer et al. (2012) researched the sport of soccer on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without ID through skills instruction and a soccer tournament using a survey instrument to measure social competence, changing problem behaviors, and attitudes and behavioral intentions. Bota et al. (2014) surveyed Unified Partners and Athletes to compare how self-concept and self-esteem evolved and changed with Unified Sports participants. Montesano et al. (2013) set their sights on the relationship between Unified Sports and physical aptitude with athletes with and without ID, using physical fitness evaluations such as the Cooper (Maksud & Coutts, 1971) and Sargent test (Sargent, 1924).

More recently, McConkey and Menke (2022) used a questionnaire to examine community participation with Unified Athletes and Partners and determined that both groups felt greater social inclusion when participating in sports. In addition, Oakes et al.'s study (2022) revolved around campus recreation and sports experiences of students with ID inside and outside the Unified context, through a survey.

As far as research on Unified Sports outside of Unified Partners and Athletes, McConkey et al. (2013) was more inclusive in involving more constituents by looking at the perception of Unified Sports from athletes, partners, coaches, family caretakers, and community representatives through qualitative interviews. Findings showed that Unified Sports resulted in greater social inclusion for everyone, specifically athletes. While this study did include more constituents outside of partners and athletes, it did not discuss the experiences from an administrator's point of view in establishing a Unified Sports program.

More recently, Karkaletsis et al. (2021) focused on the psychological effects of a Unified Sports program on the attitudes regarding the inclusiveness of people with ID from the student perspective working with athletes with ID. This study used a mixed-methods

approach by surveying Unified Partners and interviewing administrators and teachers. While this study gave more insight into how administrative constituents viewed Unified, it also did not include commentary about how to establish a Unified Sports program from the administrator instructor perspective.

In summary, studies about Unified Sports have mainly focused on the experiences of Unified Partners and Athletes, with the majority of studies showing both positive physical and social benefits of having a Unified Sports program. Studies have yet to study and highlight the challenges Unified Sports programs may face. Research has not investigated how Unified Sports programs are established or sustained, and the challenges that may come about. In addition, many research methodologies within Unified Sports have revolved around interviews, surveys, and observations from the perspective of Unified Athletes and Partners (Castagno, 2001; Hassan et al., 2012; Özer et al., 2012; Wilski et al., 2012). Research has yet to focus on the experiences of creating a Unified Sports program and the challenges it may entail from an administrative perspective. Establishing a program is the foundation that needs to be put in place for there to even be a Unified Sports program to begin with; therefore, this research is necessary for the creation of Unified Sports.

This study is unique in that it used the methodology of autoethnography and a semi-structured interview from administrative perspectives to understand how a Unified Sports program is created through university classroom instruction, specifically experiential learning in a Sport Event Management class. Both the methodology and the participants in this study are unique to the sphere of research on Unified Sports within Special Olympics.

Experiential Learning and Sport Management Survey Instrument

Sport management is an area of study where practical application and skills are learned through experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Moorman, 2004; Schneider & Stier, 2006). Hands-on experience is crucial for a student to obtain a job within the sports industry (Pierce & Petersen, 2010). In addition, the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) emphasizes the importance of experiential learning within the discipline of sport management (Brady et al., 2018). The pedagogy of experiential learning provides an opportunity to implement conceptual knowledge with practical application (Dees & Hall, 2012). Some programs tend to embed experiential learning within various courses, which make up the core courses of a sport management curriculum, such as the course of Sport Event Management. Some experiential learning focuses on sponsorship and sales (McKelvey & Southall, 2008) while others may focus on sport facility management (Diacin, 2018). The majority of sport management programs have a capstone internship opportunity as the pinnacle of experiential learning within the program (Sauder & Mudrick, 2018). Within sport management, sport is the event, and students learn how to plan and manage a sporting event. The Sport Event Management class is a staple of the sport management curriculum and provides an opportunity to embed experiential learning by having students work together to plan and execute an event using theory and practice.

Bridging the Gap in a Sport Event Management Class

Sport management curriculum has historically embedded a sport event component within the discipline (Pauline, 2013). While some classes take a theoretical approach, ideally, students learn more through the high-impact practice of experiential learning (Bower, 2014). Therefore, it is worthwhile if students have practice planning and staging a sporting event through practical application from start to finish. By having a Sport Event Management class work directly with Unified Sports, the class can create an experiential learning opportunity in which students work with individuals with ID, connect with an off-campus nonprofit organization, and gain invaluable experience creating a sporting event from the ground up. To do this, there must be a collaboration among multiple entities within the university community and the Special Olympics. This alternative route to the creation of Unified Sports through a Sport Event Management course instead of a traditional student organization creates a strong foundation. This foundation serves as the initial start of the club, in which students gain instruction on event planning and learning how to work with diverse populations—in this case, athletes with ID.

Methodology

An autoethnography was used in this study, along with an interview with a Special Olympics representative. An autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that uses the author's personal experiences to better understand certain aspects of society (Ellis & Adams, 2011). Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places oneself within a social context; through a reflexive process, the author is able to understand their role and place perspective on certain instances within society. Autoethnographic research is very common in the social sciences and humanities space (Butz & Besio, 2009). Autoethnographies provide a level of reflexivity within research and a constitution for the researcher on how participants are understood and portrayed through the research process (Meneley & Young, 2005).

Self-reflection of the author took place between September 2021 and June 2022, after working with students enrolled in a Sport Event Management class to plan and execute two Special Olympics Unified events for one academic semester. The autoethnography is written in the third person, and the author journaled her experiences working with Special Olympics weekly (Reed-Danahay, 2009). During her weekly reflections, she sought out to answer the following research questions:

R1: How does one establish a Unified Sports program on a college campus?

R2: What are the challenges of sustaining a Unified Sports program on campus?

The author reflected on her experiences for a total of 41 weeks and had 41 journal entries. Within each weekly journal entry, the author would attempt to answer the two research questions about how one establishes a Unified Sports program on a college campus as well as the challenges of sustaining a Unified Sports program on a college campus. Journal entries consisted of experiences reaching out for fundraising, partnerships, working with student leadership, discussing event planning with Special Olympics, and conversations with different departments throughout the university.

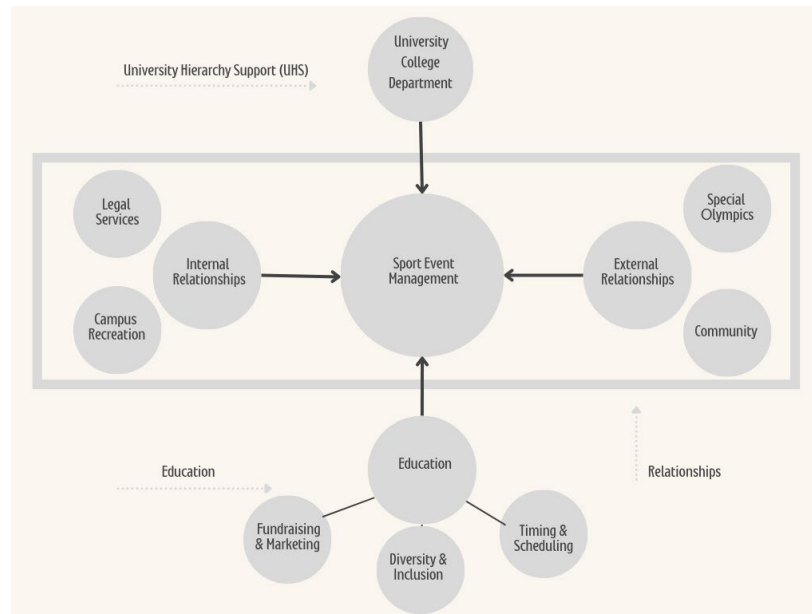
Journal entries were coded to answer research questions to better understand how to create a sustainable model for implementing a Unified Sports program on a university campus. In addition to the author's self-reflection through an autoethnography, the author also reached out to interview a Special Olympics state representative, whose title is the Director of Sports, and whose job responsibilities include overseeing Unified Sports programming as well as facilitating statewide Special Olympics events. The Special Olympics representative has worked with the organization for over seven years and has worked in multiple capacities from volunteering, to interning, to an entry-level position, to now being a director within the organization. This interview with the Director of Sports took a total of 23 minutes and 42 seconds and helped give a stakeholder perspective to the autoethnography.

Once the interview with the Director of Sports took place, the principal researcher coded the data to answer the two research questions about how one establishes a Unified Sports Program and the challenges of sustaining a Unified Sports program. Once the interview was coded, the themes from the interview were compared with the principal investigator's own journal entry reflections. The author was then able to come up with themes through the coding process which assisted in the creation of the Unified Model for a Sport Event Management Course (UMSEMC).

While two events took place during the duration of the academic semester, a considerable amount of time and effort went in before, during, and after each event. The triangulation of data led to the evolution of the UMSEMC, which is a model based on a coded thematic analysis found while journaling and through the principal investigator's interview with a Special Olympics representative. The themes in the UMSEMC include: University Hierarchy Support (UHS), Relationship Building (Internal and External), and Education. The UMSEMC provides guidance to classroom instructors looking to partner with Unified Special Olympics and implement experiential learning within a Sport Event Management course.

Unified Model for a Sport Event Management Course (UMSEMC)

Based on the data collected, one establishes a Unified Sports Program by having University Hierarchy Support (UHS), Relationship Building (Internal and External), and Education. All segments need one another, while some are of higher importance than others. The UMSEMC was created as a guide to help others in the discipline of sport management to understand better how to implement experiential learning with a nonprofit organization, specifically with Unified Special Olympics. The following are the detailed answers to each research question and the pillars of how to establish and sustain a Unified Sports program.

Figure 1*Unified Model for a Sport Event Management Course (UMSEMC)***University Hierarchy Support (UHS)**

University Hierarchy Support (UHS) is the backing one receives from their institution. This backing includes the department, college, and university. For a Unified Sports program to be implemented, the department needs to approve the experiential learning aspect of the class and partner with Special Olympics. Support means assistance in setting up a banking account to support fundraising efforts, marketing, and advertising on social media, and finding funding resources to help finance the event (jerseys, facilities, whistles, t-shirts, etc.). In addition, support can also be an encouragement for the partnership, attending the event, and suggesting different university entities that could help with the event. Departmental support is fundamental in laying down the foundation for a sustainable event and a meaningful relationship with Unified Special Olympics. Without departmental support, the event will not happen. Regarding the college and the university, it is up to the department to update the college and university on what is going on with the partnership with Special Olympics. Meeting with members of the UHS, like the Chair and Dean, and having a question-and-answer session, can create opportunities for purposeful dialogue, leading to a successful collaboration with all involved parties.

Challenges

The institution may not be on board with supporting one's efforts due to financial obligations, risk and liability concerns, or lacking infrastructure (facilities and equipment) to support outside constituents like the Special Olympics. Therefore, to gain support, it is important to be clear on how the university hierarchy can be supportive. Having a clear proposal and making oneself available for questions will show initiative and instill

confidence in your ability to instruct the course and build internal and external relationships so that the partnership with the Special Olympics can move forward with support.

Relationships (External and Internal)

Relationship building with internal and external constituents is important in creating a sustainable and inclusive Unified Special Olympics course. The four central relationships that need to be established are the external relationships with the Special Olympics and the community and the internal relationships on campus with Legal Services and Campus Recreation.

Special Olympics (External)

Establishing a relationship with the Special Olympics in the community is crucial to establishing a partnership to host Unified Special Olympics events on campus. Usually there is one point person from the Special Olympics organization who will help you navigate through the paperwork (waivers, background checks, certifications, etc.) and provide information and resources to set the foundation for moving forward. A simple phone call or email to the Special Olympics organization in your state will allow you to connect with this person. In addition, there is a Unified guidebook that can be found on the Special Olympics website that will assist in getting started. The guide is a great start, but all Unified programs are diverse in inception and execution, so it is essential to have an idea of what you are planning to do and to be able to talk through this with the Unified Special Olympics representative from your state.

Example: When using the guide to establish a Unified Sports Program on campus and embed it in a class, there were no guidelines. The guide is student-centered, and unless you have a very motivated student who will be at the institution for a minimum of at least two years, then it is difficult to establish the program. In addition, the guide does not educate Unified Partners on how to work with athletes with intellectual disabilities. The pedagogy of education is not embedded in the guide.

Challenges

Your experience with Unified Special Olympics will be dependent on the point person who runs the Unified program in your state. Every point person has a different way of doing things and level of experience; therefore, once establishing this relationship, make sure that you have a contingency plan for if this person leaves or if you need to speak with someone else to gain additional information. In addition, having a memorandum of understanding will help in making sure that both entities know what is expected of them and will keep both parties accountable.

Example: When first starting out, I worked with three different people. There was a lot of turnover at the organization, and when one person quit, there was always a lag period to replace the other person, even though we were in the middle of programming and event execution. This lack of contingency plan created a way to have that

conversation about a continuity plan, and now our program is on autopilot, and anyone coming into the role knows what it is going on and can work with our specific program from the start.

Community (External)

Having a relationship with the community is important for the development of students and learning about external constituents as well as establishing a relationship in the name of the university. The community involves households who may have a family member with an ID as well as potential sponsors like restaurants who can help with fundraising. Having a footprint in the community will help students to build relationships that will hopefully be long-lasting. Students will be able to expand their understanding of the impact that the university has off campus and will see how community partnerships and relationships are built and maintained through interaction with the community.

Example: Students were able to host fundraisers like percentage nights close to the university. This created an opportunity for Special Olympians and their families who lived in the area to engage with students, learn more about the program, and give suggestions so that the students could work with community constituents to curate a Unified event.

Challenges

It is important to understand the relationship that the university already has in place with the community. For instance, if a partnership is already in place, then it is important to know what that relationship entails and how your class can add value to that existing partnership. In addition, working with Legal Services at the university will help in understanding how to adhere to guidelines related to establishing and maintaining community-based relationships.

Example: We were working with an organization for a couple of years for fundraising, then the university decided to create an official partnership with this organization (outside of the scope of our program, department, or college). Under the agreement terms of the organization, we could not fundraise in the capacity that we had been doing for two years. Working with the organization would have to fall under the periphery of the university agreement and would not enable us to fundraise. The university was unwilling to work with us on this agreement, and therefore, we had to find alternative fundraising arrangements.

Legal Services (Internal)

Having a relationship with Legal Services is crucial to ensuring that everything that takes place regarding your course and the Unified Special Olympics program is law-abiding and in accordance with university guidelines. The legal department will work with Unified Special Olympics and the instructor to create paperwork and to make sure that all liability and risk for athletes, partners, and volunteers is solidified and is in good standing from a university legal standpoint. While Unified Special Olympics has waivers for

Partners, Athletes, and Volunteers, that is not covered under university guidelines, so making sure that the legal department is up to date with plans helps to make sure that everything runs smoothly.

Example: The university I work at was very concerned about bringing athletes with intellectual disabilities to campus, due to them being a vulnerable population. Therefore, legal services had to make sure we had all liability and risk management language incorporated within the university event liability form so that the university was covered in case someone suffered from an injury. In addition, we started out only including athletes over the age of 18, because bringing athletes in under the age of 18 created another layer of complexity. In the end, we were able to include everyone, but it took a lot of communication and understanding from the Special Olympics and Legal Services.

Challenges

Having all parties meet simultaneously will help give more information on what to expect from bringing Unified to a college campus. Usually, Legal Services is not familiar with the program, but once they meet with the Special Olympics representative and the class instructor, they have a better idea of the paperwork that is needed for off-campus visitors playing in an athletic event. Usually, the biggest concern for Legal Services is that the visitors do have a disability. In this respect, the Special Olympics can help clear up any concern around athletes with an ID engaging in a sport on the college campus. Legal Services will assist in drawing up contracts or memorandums of understanding with the Special Olympics and any outside partnerships associated with the event.

Example: It was difficult to coordinate the schedules of six busy individuals, and it was important that everyone was on the call at the same time. Just try to do this as early as possible and check in with Legal Services annually to ensure that nothing has been changed or updated.

Campus Recreation (Internal)

Many Campus Recreation employees are familiar with Unified. Unified is a staple on many campuses across the U.S. Often, the employees may have heard about Unified through National Intramural and Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA). Campus Recreation helps with facility and equipment rentals for the event. Depending on the sporting event, Campus Recreation can usually assist, as long as it is a sport or activity offered on campus. Working with Campus Recreation adds another aspect of safety to all athletes, partners, and volunteers. On campus, Unified events will have someone on staff who can help with first aid and any urgent emergency that may present itself. Working with Campus Recreation creates more buzz and promotion around the event, since many students are connected with Campus Recreation from a club or fitness standpoint.

Example: The Unified event took place in the campus recreation center, and historically the program is housed in Campus Recreation as a college club. Therefore, they have the resources (equipment, space, first aid, etc.) to facilitate a Unified Sports program. This partnership is an easy one-stop shop for the event.

Challenges

There is a high turnover rate in Campus Recreation due to students transitioning out of roles with the recreation center once they graduate. Constant communication via email (keeping a paper trail) helps in understanding who to talk to and making sure that reservations and rentals are in place prior to the event. Having a contact and continuity plan for when that contact may leave will be in your best interest when establishing this relationship.

Example: Campus Recreation is usually run by students, so every semester, you will most likely be dealing with someone new. Just make sure to have a paper trail with information about the event and equipment rental, so the next person in the position can scroll down and review it.

Education

Educating students on the aspects of sport event management and working with individuals with ID is the crux of the course. Students taking the course will learn about diversity and inclusion through working with Special Olympic Athletes with ID. Students will then plan sporting events for Unified Athletes. This type of education creates empathy and also practical experience for students to gain an opportunity to learn how to plan an event for a specific population, those with ID. The most important aspects of education in the classroom include: teaching students the history of the Special Olympics and working with individuals with ID; scheduling a class at a time when partners, athletes, volunteers, and supporting members can be available to attend and participate in fundraising and marketing, to raise money to host the event and market and promote the event to students who may be interested in volunteering and/or working for the Special Olympics.

Example: Learning the history of the Special Olympics, working with athletes with ID, and about disability and adaptive sport in general, will give students more perspective on diversity and sport and how to be thoughtful and informed when creating a sporting event.

Diversity and Inclusion

Understanding diverse populations and knowing how to include them best is the foundation that the course is built on. In this instance, working with athletes with intellectual disabilities and understanding the adaptations that need to be made sets the tone for the entire course and how you plan, communicate, and execute the Unified event. Knowing the correct language to use, as well as how to work with Unified Athletes and how to adapt to their needs, is vital. Establishing the importance of the limited number of sport and recreation opportunities for people with ID and discussing how to create programming as a class is key to having a successful event where compassion and adaptability are implemented. It is important to establish which sport you would like to host during this time. You want to work with Special Olympics to see the popular Special Olympic sports in your area and how the students can integrate that into the event. This education is crucial in creating a successful, compassionate, and sustainable event.

Supporting members and Unified Athletes will still want to participate in the event as long as it is built on trust, mutual understanding, and respect. Support means understanding the needs and wants of the attendees and participants.

Example: Diversity in the context of the Unified sporting event means working with athletes with ID. Through this experience, students gain an in-depth knowledge about how to work with this specific population from theory and practical application. For instance, we order shirts for everyone who participates, and they put them on at the event. We learned very early on that participants who are autistic do not like tags on their shirts, so we then had to have someone cut the tags out of the shirts for the participants. Also, our announcer accidentally called a Unified Athlete by the wrong pronoun, so we were able to learn more about pronouns and gender identity in class and discuss how it fit into sport event management so that we did not make the same mistake in the future.

Scheduling and Timing

Scheduling your class during a large block of time in the evening is ideal for your collaboration with a Sport Event Management class and the Special Olympics. For example, having class from 6:30 to 9:15 p.m. on a Wednesday creates an opportunity to host an event and also have spectators and participants. Once a Unified Sports program is established on campus, then it is up to the Special Olympics to provide participants who will be the Unified Athletes. Since these participants have an ID, transportation is a big issue; therefore, having the event later in the evening provides an opportunity for their supporting member (parent, guardian, sibling, friend, etc.) to drive them to and from the event. You may struggle to find participants or available partners if the event is during the day or on the weekend, since students may not be required to attend a class outside the designated class time.

Example: Having two hours and 45 minutes gives the class enough time to set up and break down the event; plus, the event is during the class, so students will not have an excuse for not being able to attend and participate because it is already embedded in their schedule. When this class was two or three days a week, and we had to have the event on a day outside of the class time, we ran into issues, because students were not required to be there outside of the designated class time.

Fundraising and Marketing

The Special Olympics is likely to give you start-up funds; you can also apply for grant opportunities through the Special Olympics organization. However, you will have costs associated with the event, such as t-shirts, facility reservations, food, jerseys, etc. (everything you would need for a sporting event). Fundraising can include percentage nights and donations from various entities. Therefore, it is very important to establish a fund in which you can accept donations for your event and embed fundraising and marketing into the curriculum of the Sport Event Management course. Being able to accept a donation and earmarking funds to spend as needed will be important to your event's success.

Example: Fundraising was easy because everyone wanted to support our cause through product donations, percentage nights, and raffling off gift cards. The hard part was where the money was to go and how we would access it. The university was very disorganized and did not have a way for us to collect funds and earmark them for our use. Therefore, Special Olympics created an account for donations to go, and donations were earmarked for our Unified events. In addition, Special Olympics was able to give companies and organizations donation receipts for tax purposes. Having a bank account to access funds and earmark the money for your benefit is very important to the process. Without funding, there can be no event, especially when the university refuses to provide funding.

Challenges

The challenge may be identifying what the class is lacking, and how you need to facilitate that learning. Reaching out to guest speakers who specialize in working with athletes with an ID, event planning, and fundraising and marketing can assist students in learning more about specific components of organizing a Unified event for the class. If the class is not in a one-time block or the middle of the day, then most likely, the event will have to be on the weekend, when many students may not be available or may not be required to attend because it is not during class time. This requires additional planning and brings on nuanced challenges that can be corrected ahead of time.

Example: I am not as familiar with Special Olympics as a representative who works at the organization; therefore, it was very important to have someone come in and talk to the students. In addition, I invited social media marketers and graphic design specialists, and we also consulted with Unified Athletes participants and their families to make sure that we had all the pieces of the puzzle for the event. This changed every semester as we tried to improve the event. For instance, in year one we were concerned about creating a social media account and posting information for our event. By year two, we were creating engaging TikTok and promotional videos and had guest speakers that helped us more with content creation.

Creating a Unified Special Olympics College Club

The majority of the time in the Sport Event Management class will be spent planning the actual event. If done correctly, you can have multiple events throughout the semester. The idea is for students to learn about working with diverse populations and plan the event from start to finish. Having multiple events gives students an opportunity to have more chances to improve the events. While there are several textbooks that can be helpful in the area of Sport Event Management, it may also be beneficial to use supplemented reading material to emphasize adaptive sport and working with diverse populations.

Once you have taught the Sport Event Management class for one semester, you can establish a registered student organization. By this point, you will have a number of students who have learned the basics of Sport Event Management and how to work with athletes with ID. Having a group of students with a basic understanding of these two topics

will provide a strong foundation for the registered student organization. The students will already be registered with Special Olympics as Unified Partners. The future steps they will need to take will be to satisfy the requirements for the student organization.

One of the biggest challenges working on a college campus with students is that students come and go about every four years. According to the Special Olympics Representative interviewed, "The challenge is keeping students, you know, students graduate, and they move on. Therefore, keeping that flow of students who are keeping the club going is the challenge. But you know, having a staff person or professor or a coach or somebody on the campus who is knowledgeable of the club is very helpful to keeping that going as well." Therefore, the faculty advisor will help guide students and provide continuity for the next generation who transition to being members of the club. Having the partnership between the Sport Event Management class and Unified Special Olympics ultimately creates a pipeline of experienced and educated students/Unified Partners, thus creating a sustainable Unified club on campus for generations to come.

Discussion

According to the National Institute of Health (2022), between 1-3% of the Western population is estimated to have an intellectual disability (ID). Exact numbers are challenging to determine at birth because some of the symptoms may not become clear until later in childhood. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th edition defines ID as a disorder characterized by intellectual and functional deficits with an initial onset of these deficits occurring during the developmental period of one's life. There are four levels of ID: mild, moderate, severe, and profound. Approximately 85% of those affected by ID fall within the moderate range of the ID population (APA, 2013). Unified Sports has provided many of those with ID an opportunity to be a part of the Special Olympics organization and to play and compete alongside athletes who do not have ID.

This research study is unique in that it builds on literature dedicated to the Unified Sports program within the Special Olympics, specifically in the context of sport management experiential learning through the qualitative methodology of autoethnography. This builds on literature within Unified Sports because this research gives the administrative perspective on building a program and not the Unified Athlete or Partner perspective on how Unified positively impacts physical fitness or social inclusion. In addition, this adds on to the research methodologies used to study Unified Sports, by adding in the methodology of autoethnography since the majority of research on Unified Sports uses some form of an interview protocol or survey. Lastly, this research study adds to literature on experiential learning and sport management, because it is focused on how instructors can work with a community partner to create an experiential learning opportunity within a Sport Event Management class.

According to the Special Olympics representative, "Getting those core volunteers and students to get involved in a Unified program who are very excited about Special Olympics and want to lead a club and then recruiting and even those students can recruit new ones to keep it going is very important to having a program." Sport management is a discipline in which experiential learning is the crux for how students absorb information

and prepare themselves for a career in the sport and recreation industry. Based on reflective journal entries through the autoethnographic process and the interviews with the Special Olympics representative, one establishes a Unified Sports Program by having: University Hierarchy Support (UHS), Relationship Building (Internal and External), and Education. While some segments are of higher importance than others, all segments are needed to establish a Unified Special Olympics program on a college campus through classroom instruction. The Unified Model for a Sport Event Management Course (UMSEMC) assists instructors looking to do this through classroom instruction and involves all of the segments discussed to establish a Unified Special Olympics program on a college campus and keep it sustainable.

Building to a capstone class like a practicum or an internship is crucial to the development of the student so that by the time they are ready for their internship, they can pursue an opportunity that fits their interests with the experience to be a competitive candidate for the internship (Sotiriadou, 2011). Therefore, it is important to embed experiential learning in as many aspects of the sport management curriculum as possible. Experiential opportunities are very much dependent on the modality and the location of the sport management program and if the program is in a metropolitan, rural, or suburban setting. The Special Olympics is an organization based in all 50 states of the U.S. and around the world (Harada et al., 2011). The Special Olympics as an organization is accessible to many students in various locations worldwide. This study provided context for how a university can provide a destination for athletes with ID to have an opportunity to meet and interact with members of a local campus community. This study serves as a guide for instructors looking to implement on-campus experiential learning opportunities with students and setting a foundation of success for students to learn from and then develop their own brand of a Special Olympics College Club.

Limitations

Autoethnographies provide a self-reflective perspective for the reader based on the researcher's lived experience. While this paper followed the methodology of autoethnography, the reflections of the researcher were triangulated with the responses of an organizational stakeholder to provide more validity and reliability to the data set. However, this research study is based on the perspectives of two individuals who worked together to curate an event with students, and their experiences may not be reflective of what another person might experience. Individual experiences are based on a variety of factors such as location of a university, accessibility to sport facilities, and stakeholder support. Additionally, autoethnographies require self-disclosure, which, depending on the participants, may make some connections to the research more of a challenge (Méndez, 2013). This study provides a limited perspective and builds on literature on the experiences of Unified administrators. This research takes an advisor-instructor point of view that has not been a part of the Unified and Special Olympics literature, which usually focuses on the coach, Unified Partner, or athlete's point of view.

Conclusion

The Special Olympics has been around since 1968 and is the leading organization that is dedicated to working with athletes with ID by creating sports programming for children and adults (Haas, 2012). Experiential learning allows students to gain practical experience; however, sometimes it is difficult for a faculty member or a program to create opportunities due to the remote location of the university or the inability to establish a strong and sustainable relationship with a community partner. Reaching out to a reputable national organization with ties all around the nation can help alleviate the stress of trying to create an experiential opportunity from nothing. This article established a framework for how a faculty member can engage students and the greater university community and work with a diverse population of individuals. This framework creates an opportunity for experiential learning within the classroom while also giving students the autonomy to branch out and create a sustainable Unified club within their university by offering a guide from two constituents who worked closely together to curate a Special Olympics event through a Sport Event Management class and the Special Olympics.

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