



Journal of Education and Recreation Patterns (JERP)

www.jerpatterns.com

“It’s a Complicated Conversation”: Ncaa Division III Athletic Administrators’ Perceptions of Adaptive Sports

Derek WHALEY¹, Kylie DAVIS², Abbey Rose SHAFER³,
Davis KING⁴, Sarah STOKOWSKI⁵, Michael GODFREY⁶

To cite this article:

Whaley, D., Davis, K., Schafer, A. R., King, D., Stokowski, S., & Godfrey, M. (2023). “It’s a Complicated Conversation”: NCAA Division III Athletic Administrators’ Perceptions of Adaptive Sports. *Journal of Education and Recreation Patterns (JERP)*, 4 (1), 153-168. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53016/jerp.v4i1.87>

Journal of Education and Recreation Patterns (JERP) is an international scientific, high quality open access, peer viewed scholarly journal provides a comprehensive range of unique online-only journal submission services to academics, researchers, advanced doctoral students and other professionals in their field. This journal publishes original research papers, theory-based empirical papers, review papers, case studies, conference reports, book reviews, essay and relevant reports twice a year (June and December) in online versions.

¹ Derek Whaley, Clemson University, dwwhale@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0978-1110](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0978-1110)

² Kylie Davis, Clemson University, kd2@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7004-8674](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7004-8674)

³ Abbey Rose Schafer, Clemson University, arschaf@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8306-980X](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8306-980X)

⁴ Davis King, Clemson University, daking@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8904-6327](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8904-6327)

⁵ Sarah Stokowski, Clemson University, stoko@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7368-7224](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7368-7224)

⁶ Michael Godfrey, Clemson University, mgodfre@clemson.edu, [ID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7424-7995](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7424-7995)

“It’s a Complicated Conversation”: NCAA Division III Athletic Administrator’s Perceptions of Adaptive Sports

Derek WHALEY¹, Kylie DAVIS², Abbey Rose SCHAFER³, Davis KING⁴, Sarah STOKOWSKI⁵, Michael GODFREY⁶

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Original Research Paper

Received 04.01. 2023

Accepted 18.06. 2023

<https://jerpatterns.com>

June, 2023

Volume: 4, No: 1

Pages: 153-168

ABSTRACT

In the U.S., adaptive sports have existed for more than 100 years, providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Despite the growth of adaptive sports in interscholastic and professional spaces, as well as the NCAA’s commitment to inclusion, there are minimal opportunities for students with disabilities to compete in sports at the collegiate level. Through semi-structured interview method, the purpose of this study was to understand Division III athletic administrators (N= 8) perceptions of adaptive sports. Throughout the data, 4 themes emerged: lack of knowledge, how, impact, and resources. Implications from this study suggest that a strategic plan needs to be developed to improve visibility, awareness, and general knowledge regarding adaptive sports. Additionally, a strategic plan targeting collegiate athletics is necessary to promote conversations around adaptive sports. Sponsoring adaptive sports is in line with the Division III philosophy. Although the participants indicated interest in adopting adaptive sports, barriers (e.g., resources, compliance with federal law) were a deterrent. To this, the NCAA should educate the membership on the benefits of adaptive sports and incentivize institutions to implement adaptive sports programming.

Keywords: Adaptive Sports, Athletic Administration, Division III, Intercollegiate Athletics



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States (U.S.), 19% of college students reported having a disability (9.3% physical disability); however, less than 0.5% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions offer opportunities to participate in adaptive sports (Siegfried et al., 2021). Siegfried et al. (2021) suggested that the growth of collegiate adaptive sports has increased in recent years due to the development of the American Collegiate Society for Adapted Athletics. Currently, approximately 500,000 NCAA student-athletes represent 1,113 member institutions, competing in 24 men's and women's sports across three divisions (I, II, III; NCAA, n.d.a; Siegfried et al., 2021). According to the Challenged Athletes Foundation (n.d.), as of August 2019, there were only 23 NCAA membership institutions (2.07%) that offered adaptive sports programs.

Student-athletes with disabilities have not always had equal opportunities to participate in the same sports programs as their able-bodied counterparts (e.g., Stokowski, 2013; Stokowski et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2020; Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). Despite a directive from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights which called for equality in regard to sports participation for individuals with disabilities, such directives do not apply to intercollegiate athletics (Williams, 2013). A study by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2010, revealed that students with disabilities did not have equal opportunities to engage in extracurricular athletics (Comerford, 2018). In response, the Office of Civil Rights (2013) published a Dear Colleague Letter outlining policies and practices that must be implemented to promote equal opportunities for sports participation. Since the letter's publication in 2013, interscholastic (high school) athletes with disabilities participation in adaptive sports have steadily increased (Comerford, 2018). With the increase in reported students with disabilities in post-secondary education (De Brey et al., 2021), administrators in higher education must be proactive in their efforts to maintain policy, develop procedures, and offer equitable opportunities for all students (Anderson et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022; Stokowski et al., 2023).

While sport participation rates for athletes with disabilities have increased, there is cause for concern at the collegiate level (McGinniss et al., 2020). As noted by Stokowski and O'Donnell (2022), "as higher education continues to strive to be inclusive and accepting of all identities...it is time for the NCAA to rethink how disability can be included throughout all aspects of collegiate sports" (p. 41). Due to the increase of individuals with disabilities participating in adaptive sports (Comerford, 2018) and the prevalence of students with disabilities in higher education (Siegfried et al., 2021), institutions should consider providing increased opportunities for those with disabilities to participate in NCAA sanctioned sports (Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to understand Division III athletic administrators' perceptions of collegiate adaptive sports. Specifically, this study strived to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of Division III athletic administrators towards providing intercollegiate adaptive sports opportunities?

RQ2: What barriers/facilitators exist in the promotion, development, and growth of adaptive sports among Division III institutions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability

Individuals with disabilities reported a lower quality of life, limited agency, and increased feelings of sadness compared to their able-bodied counterparts (Blinde & Taub, 1999; Zabriskie et al., 2005). To this, individuals with disabilities often do not participate in social activities. Sports participation serves as an effective means to elevate the negative impacts of disability (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1999; Stokowski et al., 2020; Zabriskie et al., 2005). Sport and recreation activities are a consistent facilitator of an individual's psychological and physical health and provide an ongoing source of personal and social entertainment (e.g., Hutchens et al., 2020; Lower et al., 2013; Proctor et al., 2022). Participation in sports and recreation is particularly valuable for individuals with disabilities in mitigating the negative impacts of disability while facilitating a positive self-image and identity (Lundberg, Bennett, et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2014; Stokowski et al., 2020). Sports for individuals with disabilities is often unavailable in mainstream sports settings (e.g., Kolotouchkina et al., 2021), further demonstrating the importance of adaptive sports offerings and opportunities.

Adaptive Sports

In the US, adaptive sports, or organized sports for people with disabilities, have existed for over 100 years (Weiler et al., 2022). The first event (Cripples Olympiad), tailored specifically to athletics with physical disabilities, was held in New York in 1911 (Weiler et al., 2022). The Special Olympics organization began in the early 1960s, providing organized and guided training, summer camps, and competitions for individuals with intellectual and cognitive disabilities (Special Olympics, n.d.).

Prior to the introduction of the Special Olympics, the worldwide adaptive sports movement became more prevalent in 1948 due to Dr. Ludwig Guttmann. During this time, Guttmann worked in Germany with patients who had acquired spinal cord injuries during World War II and found sports and recreation to be viable interventions for improving the lives of his patients (Slater & Meade, 2004). Guttmann believed sports provided those with spinal cord injuries a sense of hope and increased feelings of self-worth (Brittain et al., 2013).

Additionally, sports have the power to change society's attitudes toward people with spinal cord injuries. In July of 1948 (parallel to the 1948 Summer Olympics in London), Guttmann held the first wheelchair games at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, just outside London. These games consisted of two teams competing in an archery demonstration and, in 1960, led to the first wheelchair Olympics. In 1976, the wheelchair games would later be known as the Paralympic Games and include individuals with physical, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities (Brittain et al., 2013). Organized and sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Paralympic Games are held in the summer and winter directly following the Olympic Games in the same host city and provide 28 elite sport competitions (IPC, n.d.).

Adaptive sports serve individuals with varying physical and intellectual disabilities and provide participation opportunities at different levels of competition (i.e., recreational, competitive, elite) all of which have differing intentions, goals, and outcomes. Adaptive sports are commonly practiced throughout various settings: hospitals, local parks, recreation departments, K-12 schools, and universities (Lundberg, Taniguchi, et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2014). The primary philosophy of adaptive sports is to facilitate independent sport participation by encouraging the participants to modify activities. Such modifications include rule and equipment modifications as well as modifications regarding how the activities are facilitated and instructed (Lundberg, Taniguchi, et al., 2011).

Collegiate Adaptive Sports

Under the direction of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA; n.d.), in 1970, the University of Illinois was the first to introduce the first adaptive intercollegiate sport, wheelchair basketball (Siegfried et al., 2021). The NWBA hosted the first national championship in 1977 and continues to host the national collegiate wheelchair basketball tournament. Historically, the NCAA's interest in adaptive sports has been inconsistent. Despite the clear and direct language used in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding equal opportunities for students with disabilities, institutions continue to receive criticism surrounding athletic opportunities for students with disabilities (McGinniss et al., 2020). In response to those criticisms, in 2015, the Eastern Collegiate Athletics Conference (ECAC) was the first NCAA-sanctioned conference to provide adaptive sports championship opportunities (i.e., swimming, rowing, track and field). Although there was early excitement surrounding the ECAC adaptive sports championships, they did not continue, and there are no definitive indicators of future support from the NCAA (McGinnis et al., 2020).

Recently, the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) and the NCAA (2023) Office of Inclusion established a relationship in an effort to increase the understanding, connection, and awareness of adaptive sport within the collegiate landscape. This collaboration can potentially have widespread implications for adaptive sports on college campuses across the US. In addition to the USOPC and NCAA Office of Inclusion collaboration, in 2023, the Pac-12 established a policy mandating that the athletic departments at Pac-12 institutions provide athletic department resources (i.e., facilities, services, coaches) to para-athletes enrolled at each Pac-12 institution (Pac-12 Conference, 2023). Such partnerships and initiatives have the potential to increase access to adaptive sports to individuals with disabilities.

Division III

Division III is the NCAA's largest division, with more than 186,415 student-athletes competing in 19 sports at 442 membership institutions (NCAA, 2020). Although Division III makes up 40% of all NCAA student-athletes (Kayda, 2021), intercollegiate sport scholarship has largely ignored the Division III classification (Rubin et al., 2022; Stokowski et al., 2022). Division III has an education-forward approach in which obtaining a degree is of the highest priority (NCAA, 2022). To this, Division III institutions do not provide athletics-related financial aid (NCAA, 2022). Among Division III institutions, on average, a quarter (25%) of the student population participates in intercollegiate sports (NCAA, 2020).

Collegiate Sport Addition Process (CSAP)

The Collegiate Sport Addition Process (CSAP) is a model that considers both an institution's stakeholders and the institution as a whole when contemplating adopting a new sports program (Milstein & Lanzillo, 2019). The CSAP was developed by Milstein and Lanzillo (2019) and focused on gaining perspectives and understanding of NCAA Division I athletic directors regarding their priorities, processes, and factors used when determining the addition of a sports program at their institution. The model provides insight into the decision-making process when considering adopting a new sports program, benefiting institutional leaders and economic stakeholders. Additionally, Melstein and Lanzillo (2019) identified four priority themes (i.e., University Viability, Sport Popularity, Association Membership, Access

and Opportunity) and six phases (i.e., Driving Forces, Justification, Evaluation, Interruptions, Acceptance, Authorization) to the sport adoption decision-making process.

METHOD

Sampling

Given the Division III philosophy and demographic make-up (e.g., largest NCAA classification, student-athletes constitute a significant sub-population of students), this study focused on Division III athletic administrators’ perceptions of adaptive sports. Using purposeful sampling, eight Division III athletic administrators participated in this study (see Table 1). All participants identified as White (100%), and the majority were male (n=6). One participant disclosed a disability (hearing loss). The average age of the participants was 37.2 years old, and the participants had been in athletic administration for an average of 23.5 years.

Table 1. Demographic Table (N= 8)

Participants	Age	Race	Sex	Disability Status	Public or Private	Years in Field	State	Role
Roger	58	White	Male	None	Private	38	KS	Director of Athletics
Mason	N/A	White	Male	Hearing loss	Private	45	OH	Associate AD
Macey	35	White	Female	None	Private	13	MD	Director of Athletics
Jason	62	White	Male	None	Private	30	IL	Director of Athletics
Amy	32	White	Female	None	Private	5	WV	Director of Athletic Communication
Gary	40	White	Male	None	Private	18	NY	Director of Athletics
Larry	59	White	Male	None	Private	34	NY	Director of Athletics
Brian	31	White	Male	None	Private	5	OH	Athletics & Admissions Liaison

Data Collection

Due the sampling technique, emails were sent to Division III athletic administrators explaining the purpose of this study and inquiring as to their interest in participating in interviews (via Zoom). Semi-structured interview method was utilized. Dittmore and Stokowski (2019) suggested that eight to 12 participants are desirable when using semi-structured interview method. To this, Eight Division III administrators participated in this study. Each interview began with the researchers introducing themselves and explaining the purpose of the study. The research protocol consisted of demographic questions and nine open-ended questions related to the research questions. Given the semi-structured interview method, the researchers utilized probes (i.e., tell me more) to gain further detail and clarification as needed throughout the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed (via Zoom) and checked for accuracy. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, each was assigned a pseudonym. Coding, categorization, and identification of themes were established through Alhojailan and Ibrahim (2012) three-step coding process. The three steps consisted of data reduction, data display, as well as data drawing and conclusions (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012).

Trustworthiness and validity of the data were determined using triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interview guide was piloted one time and adjusted (i.e., clarity, consistency, understanding) prior to the first interview. Thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers, independent of one another. Upon completion of the thematic analysis, the results were compared and discussed; both researchers interpreted the data similarly.

FINDINGS

The data revealed a multitude of factors that influenced Division III athletic administrators' perceptions of adaptive sports. Four main themes (lack of knowledge, how, impact, resources) and three sub themes within resources (financial, space/facilities, faculty/staff support) emerged from the data.

Lack of Knowledge

The first and most predominant theme across all interviews was the *lack of knowledge* pertaining to the adaptive sports space. Division III administrators verbalized having limited knowledge about the role adaptive sports played at the collegiate level as well as remote familiarity with pre-existing organizations that provided opportunities for adaptive sports. Although most of the participants acknowledged that information regarding adaptive sports was accessible through associations and intramural clubs, such resources failed to result in a tenable or discernable level of awareness that would allow DIII administrators to take calculated steps toward implementing adaptive sports programming. As Roger expressed, "I'll be honest, I don't know as much as I probably should." Similarly, Larry stated, "I'm not as familiar with that, that hasn't really come across my desk or anything."

Only one adaptive sport was mentioned (appeared once) during the interview process, wheelchair basketball. The data suggested that further exploration into the realm of adaptive sports will be necessary to provide administrators with the proper understanding and knowledge to develop adaptive collegiate sports among other NCAA-sanctioned sports.

The research team inquired about the potential of adding adaptive sports programs at Division III institutions, and most participants expressed supportive sentiments toward the idea. However, it should be noted that the participants suggested adding adaptive sports as a club or intramural sport (as opposed to an NCAA-sponsored opportunity). Also, despite their lack of knowledge, the participants displayed a willingness to investigate practical avenues of implementing adaptive sports at their respective institutions. Gary mentioned, "I think there's a lack of understanding. And that is one of the reasons why I engaged with this research project, because it's an area that I don't know a lot about and would like to know more."

How

The second theme that emerged from the data was how. This theme focused on the Division III classification and the implementation of adaptive sports based on the organization's philosophy. Brian stated:

I think, you know, Division III, we exist from an enrollment standpoint. So, if we can help increase enrollment and support enrollment and improve the student experiences in a way, we should consider doing those things. Those are our two main reasons why we exist.

The researchers asked each participant about the Division III philosophy, which states that providing an all-around college experience for all students while they complete their degrees is of the utmost importance (NCAA, 2022). Noted literature on Division III philosophy provides an inclusive framework for administrators to build off independently at their respective institutions, and yet, despite the readily available text on the benefits of this subject, there is no specific mention of including and protecting para-athletics and providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in sport (Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). Due to the lack of recognition, many participants spoke to "sticking with what [they] know" in regard to Division III operational duties.

In addition, there was consistent dialogue about the potential appetite for the physical implementation of adaptive sports programs and the existing facilitators to allow such programs to develop, foster, and grow among Division III institutions. The participants indicated the need for a more robust education regarding the formation of adaptive sports. According to Macey, "I do think there's a need for education and knowledge of what it takes to create an adaptive sports program, what the options are, who are we going to compete against, etc."

Though nonexistent at this time, Amy talked about the inclusion of educational programs not necessarily being an unattainable goal for institutions as consistent continuing education of some kind is most often required by state and federal governments for nearly all educators to remain certified within their field. Researchers and participants noted that with this form of requirement, finding specialists and professionals in this specific field, whether through the Special or Paralympics organizations, willing to provide the NCAA with beneficial assistance is still a possibility. Participants noted that if they were going to begin this process, they wanted to do so properly and with appropriate understanding.

Assistance was a factor mentioned by 50% of participants when discussing the addition of collegiate adaptive sports programs; organizations such as the Special Olympics and Paralympics currently have the notoriety, support, and resources to assist in building competitive programs much like their own and even have some overlap with division three institutions already. Jason Evans stated:

We have a really good relationship with Special Olympians. In fact, if you go to our website, we've got a new facility... that is the home of the Genesis Region Special Olympic training. They can come in there like our general students, and train on their own. We host a lot of their events... I think there's some avenues that'd allow us to be successful in that. If we (as an entire division) chose to go that way.

Another included their university's requirements involving Special Olympics:

I will highlight that the Division III student-athletes, one of their significant community service projects, or core groups, is the Special Olympics, our campus and even on other campuses, we will do adaptive things with Special Olympic students you know, have them experience college life and things, in the hopes that if they're body's able, or if they want to go to college, that they've had a positive experience here.

Although providing opportunities for individuals with all kinds of disabilities is important, some of the participants appeared to lack distinction between the Paralympics and the Special Olympics.

Impact

While many of the administrators indicated that they would be in favor of the NCAA supporting adaptive sports programs, an increase in the presence of students with disabilities at universities is necessary to drive the desire and support for the development of collegiate adaptive sports programs. As stated by Roger:

We are trying to be a place that's very broadly inclusive and aware of where we have succeeded in that and where we have failed in that in recent years and throughout our history. So, I think that there's a piece where, if we could figure out how to do it and find that there were people that were interested and eager to compete in these sports, we should.

Throughout the data, the administrators indicated an inherent need to foster diversity and inclusion while exhibiting an inclination to serve the student-athlete population better. Division III programs are heavily reliant on their institutions' enrollment numbers in order to generate sufficient funding for their programs; the potential implementation of adaptive sports programs hypothetically was brought up by Larry:

But I think if we were to say, look, we have a potential to do adaptive sports and to create something in this field that hasn't existed before. I do think that it would be easier to find money for something like that than to find money for a more traditional sort of collegiate intercollegiate sport.

Multiple participants discussed the potential impact on enrollment that would result from the addition of adaptive sports. An in-depth statement from Gary shed light on the complexities that can appear during the implementation process:

So, I think that whenever we talk about adding sports, it's a complicated conversation because there's so much that goes into that, that goes beyond just, would it be a good opportunity to offer this? Because I think that we're, I don't know, I would say that me personally, I'm always trying to find ways to expand what we are for at this school to the students who are attending the school... I do think that when it comes to offering anything, we're trying to respond to demand for that sport on campus and trying to do it with being able to fund it and sort of support the sport to the degree that the athlete would get the most out of the experience.

Resources

Although the participants supported the implementation of adaptive sports, barriers existed that could potentially detour the addition of adaptive sports programs at these institutions. An overwhelming lack of resources became a prominent theme when categorizing the data. However, not all participating institutions experienced the same limitation(s), thus, generating three subcategories in this area: financial, space and facilities, and faculty and staff support.

Financial Resources

With the understanding that direct resources (e.g., donations, endowments, grants, government assistance) assist in funding Division III institutions, the participants expressed numerous concerns about the viability and financial practicality concerning the addition of adaptive sports programs at this level. Brian stated:

Another thing to just circle back to is that with DIII, I mean, there's no athletic money that is able to be given to students too, right? So that might turn some of these athletes off to that. That said, of course, we can still offer merit money based on academics. And there are several colleges that are willing to offer a lot of merit money for kids to come to their schools.

Jason also noted the monetary requirements may stand in the way of implementing adaptive sports:

You know, it's a consumer market, but that's it. It's the cost. It's money. Yeah, you know, let alone to get qualified coaches to coach whether they're able-bodied or not able-bodied, facilities, transportation.... It doesn't surprise me that there's only one (adaptive program in DIII) so far. I know that it always comes down to money. Yeah, it always comes down to money.

Additionally, administrators identified personnel salaries, program budgets, transportation, equipment, geographical concerns, and COVID-19 as limitations and constraints. Macey elaborated:

Probably resources, salaries, budgets, transportation, facilities. Depending on what kind of a you know, what we need to adapt if it's, you know, like a court for wheelchairs or if it's, whatever that might be. Our facilities are very limited and specifically where we are at foot. We are landlocked and so we are having to go off campus for our varsity teams now. And so where would we have to travel for those students to participate? So really, just resources and money.

Space and Facilities

The second resource subtheme was the lack of (accessible) space. Numerous participants commented on the ages of their institution's buildings and how many structures date back well before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted. Jason noted:

For example, our facility, we're in a city. We are kind of landlocked. So, I would prefer to have, if I was going to do it right, and treat the student athletes fairly, and again that's a relative word. As equitable as we could possibly do it; we'd need another gymnasium. We'd need another field outside. We'd need some other facilities to actually do this. The other issue with our school is we don't even have all our buildings that are ADA compatible.

ADA requirements and accessibility of facilities, with consideration to infrastructure and design within compliance, was a concurrent topic for many participants who each expressed a valid level of doubt that these requirements could be met in the immediate future. Macey stated:

Our school has several buildings on campus that are not ADA compliant. So how would they get to their dorm rooms? How would they get to the bathroom? How would they get up the steps of some of the buildings? So, with the fact of not being an ADA compliant campus entirely, and also having one person in that building and having to work with all the students on campus would be a challenge where we are.

Faculty and Staff Support

Staffing and hiring practices came into question regarding the resources necessary to successfully implement adaptive sports. The participants expressed that many of their staff members already had various responsibilities. For example, Amy said: “Having the space and the facilities, but also having the staffing, because there is not a whole lot of support staff at the Division III level.”

Travel, transportation, and the detailed aspects of hosting events were complicated components of NCAA-sponsored programs already in existence. To this, the potential addition of adaptive sports brought into question the capability to sustain existing programs along with adaptive sports programs. Amy noted:

So, athletic trainer wise, having multiple athletic trainers and even at our games, managers and SIB level. I know they might not always be stated but having somebody there to work the scores table or work the scoreboard, PA and all that stuff. I think if you were going to put on the proper game to make sure you have all of that put together so it would make them feel like they are playing a collegiate sport.... Being able to spread ourselves out throughout all the collegiate sports, we would just need more support in that aspect.

Additionally, the data displayed a lack of awareness regarding the functional needs of adaptive sports facilities, specifically, the use of shared facilities and the functionality of an adaptive program compared to traditional sports programs. To this, many participants agreed that their lack of knowledge, awareness, and dialogue concerning these existing barriers can be overcome with proper guidance and education.

DISCUSSION

This study strived to understand Division III athletic administrators’ perceptions of adaptive sports and barriers to implementing adapting sports. Four themes emerged Throughout the data (lack of knowledge, how, impact, and resources). The theme of lack of knowledge indicated a need for increased education and visibility of adaptive sports at the college level. Unfortunately, previous studies (El-Shaboury, 2022; Kolotouchkina et al., 2020; Watson, 2020) regarding adaptive sports at various levels (i.e., schools, community, Paralympics) also indicated a widespread lack of awareness of adaptive sports. El-Shaboury (2022) attributed the lack of knowledge surrounding adaptive sports to the failure of programs, practitioners, researchers, and organizations to disseminate information about adaptive sports. Additionally, most literature indicated that adaptive sports are nearly invisible on a large scale or have limited visibility. Adaptive sports media representation is scarce, and the minimal coverage adaptive sports often receive further perpetuates negative stigmas and stereotypes surrounding individuals with disabilities (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Watson, 2020).

Although there has been an increase in students with disabilities entering post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), Fines and Block (2020) found that administrators did not see the value in adding adaptive sports, citing the lack of students with disabilities on their campuses. Participants in the present study favor adding adaptive sports programs at Division III institutions. However, the administrators suggested that intramural or club sports would serve as better options for adaptive sports. As sports that are not NCAA sanctioned are not eligible for revenue sharing, athletic administrators should advocate for adaptive sports to be NCAA varsity sports (Siegfried et al., 2021). Given that the participants cited finances as a barrier to adaptive sports implementation, perhaps if adaptive sports were sanctioned by the NCAA, the association could assist in the associated costs (e.g., championships).

Implications

Based on the results of this study, several implications should be considered. First and foremost, there is a need to spread awareness about adaptive sports, the benefits of adaptive sports, and how to implement adaptive sports. According to the NCAA (n.d.b.),

As one of its core values, the NCAA believes in and is committed to an inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes and career opportunities for coaches and administrators from diverse backgrounds. In further recognizing and acting upon this value, the NCAA is increasing efforts to provide opportunities to student-athletes with education-impacting and physical disabilities. (para. 1).

Given the value the NCAA places on promoting sports for individuals with physical disabilities, perhaps the organization should consider financial assistance as well as a “how to” guide for institutions that wish to implement adaptive sports. An impact study should also be conducted to allow institutions to better understand the benefits of adding adaptive sports.

The results of this study also demonstrated the need for ADA compliance. Institutions should strive to ensure all buildings are ADA-compliant. Such efforts are essential for providing equitable experiences for all students and promoting an environment of belonging and inclusion. Institutions should also ensure they are following the directive from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights to safeguard sports participation opportunities for individuals with disabilities is being offered (Williams, 2013).

Further implications are linked to advocacy, as current adaptive sports practitioners (i.e., allied health professionals, community providers, and the 23 current university programs), large adaptive sports organizations (i.e., Move United, International Paralympic Committee), and those in the mass media have a duty to promote adaptive sports. Such stakeholders must increase visibility, awareness, and general knowledge regarding adaptive sports. Lastly, collegiate athletics must have conversations surrounding adaptive sports to engage athletic administrators. To this, Athletic administrators must be mindful of the CSAP model when considering adding adaptive sports (Melstein & Lanzillo, 2019).

Limitations and Recommendation

Several limitations exist in this study. The sampling technique should be considered a limitation as recruiting athletic administrators to participate in the study proved difficult. Researchers attribute the lack of willingness to participate in the study to the general lack of knowledge of adaptive sports. This study is not generalizable, although the results may be transferrable.

Future research should focus on a larger (and more diverse) sample of Division III institutions. Perhaps studies on adaptive sports should extend to Division I and II institutions and quantitative inquiry should be considered. Future work should examine institutions that

have adaptive sports programs to better understand the process of adding such programs. Adaptive sports student-athletes should be interviewed to better understand the experiences of this particular sub-population of athletes. Lastly, legal and policy scholars should consider examining disability law and accommodations in adaptive intercollegiate sports.

Conclusion

Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that students with disabilities are often denied the opportunity to participate in sports (e.g., Stokowski, 2013; Stokowski et al., 2017; Stokowski et al., 2020; Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). However, sports participation has significantly increased the quality of life for individuals with disabilities (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1999; Stokowski et al., 2020; Zabriskie et al., 2005). Despite legislation (e.g., ADA) that protects individuals with disabilities, directives that strive to promote sports participation for individuals with disabilities are limited to interscholastic, intramural, and club sports (Williams, 2013). The NCAA must honor its mission and implement adaptive sports throughout the membership (Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). Given the Division III philosophy (NCAA, n.d.a.) and the benefits of such philosophy (Stokowski et al., 2022), the Division III classification should consider adding adaptive sports.

REFERENCES

- Alhojailan, M. I., & Ibrahim, M. (2012). Thematic analysis: A critical review of its process and evaluation. *West East Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 39-47.
- Anderson, A. R., Stokowski, S., & Turk, M. R. (2022). Sexual minorities in intercollegiate athletics: religion, team culture and acceptance. *Sport in Society*, 25(11), 2303-2322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1933452>
- American With Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C.§12101 et seq. (1990). <https://www.ada.gov/pubs.adastatute08.htm>
- Blinde, E. M., & Taub, D. E. (1999). Personal empowerment through sport and physical fitness activity: perspectives from male college students with physical and sensory disabilities. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 22(2), 181–183.
- Brittain, I., Ramshaw, G., & Gammon, S. (2013). The marginalisation of Paralympic heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19(2), 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.681679>
- Challenged Athletes Foundation. (n.d). *Empowering lives through sport*. Author. <https://www.challengedathletes.org/>
- Comerford, D. M. (2018). A call for NCAA adapted sports championships: Following the Eastern College Athletic Conference's lead to nationalize collegiate athletic opportunities for student-athletes with disabilities. *Marquette Sports Law Review*, 28(2), 525–552.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- De Brey, C., Snyder, T. D., Zhang, A., and Dillow, S. A. (2021). *Digest of Education Statistics 2019* (NCES 2021-009). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Dittmore, S. W., & Stokowski, S. (2019). Interviews. In D. P. S. Andrew, P. M. Peterson, & C. D. McEvoy (Eds.), *Research Methods and Design in Sport Management* (2nd ed., pp. 99 - 110). Human Kinetics.
- El-Shaboury, Y. (2022, September 21). *Here's what adaptive athletes think about the future of adaptive sport*. Global Sport Matters. <https://globalsportmatters.com/research/2022/09/21/what-adaptive-athletes-think-future-sports/>

- Fines, A., & Block, M. (2021). Building collegiate adapted sports: goalball case study. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(3), 326–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1729113>
- Hutchens, S., Stokowski, S., Lasater, K. A., & Dittmore, S. W. (2020). Transformational Leadership in Club Sports. *Kentucky SHAPE Journal*, 58(1), 22-37.
- IPC. (n.d.). *International Paralympic Committee*. Author. <https://www.paralympic.org/>
- Kayda, R. J. (2021). *A predictive correlation study examining attrition among NCAA DIII student-athletes based on roster gender, sport-type, and sport-attrition* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Liberty University.
- Kim, K., Pickett, A. C., Stokowski, S., & Han, J. (2022). Promoting Educational Outcomes Through Openness to Diversity: An Exploration of Sport and Physical Activity. *Journal of Education and Recreation Patterns (JERP)*, 3(2), 60-76. <https://doi.org/10.53016/jerp.v3i2.52>
- Kolotouchkina, O., Llorente-Barroso, C., García-Guardia, M. L., & Pavón, J. (2021). Disability, sport, and television: Media visibility and representation of paralympic games in news programs. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13010256>
- Lower, L. M., Turner, B. A., & Petersen, J. C. (2013). A comparative analysis of perceived benefits of participation between recreational sport programs. *Recreational Sports Journal*, 37(1), 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.1123/rsj.37.1.66>
- Lundberg, N., Bennett, J., & Smith, S. (2011). Outcomes of adaptive sports and recreation participation among veterans returning from combat with acquired disability. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 45(2), 105–120.
- Lundberg, N., Taniguchi, S., McCormick, B., & Tibbs, C. (2011). Identity negotiating: Redefining stigmatized identities through adaptive sport and recreation participation among individuals with a disability. *Journal of Leisure Research; Second Quarter*, 43(2), 205-225.
- Madrigal, L., & Robbins, J. E. (2020). Student-athlete stress: An examination in United States Collegiate Athletics. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 14(2), 123–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2020.1774261>
- Mayer, W. E., & Anderson, L. S. (2014). Perceptions of people with disabilities and their families about segregated and inclusive recreation involvement. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 48(2), 150-168.
- McGinniss, K. T., Goutos, D., & Tuakli-Wosornu Y. A. (2020). Diversifying diversity, equity, and inclusion in American college athletics: The case for adaptive (and other non-traditional) sports. *The Sport Journal*. <http://thesportjournal.org/article/diversifying-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-american-college-athletics-the-case-for-adaptive-and-other-non-traditional-sports/>
- Milstein, S., & Lanzillo, J. D. (2019). Exploring the process & procedures of adding a sport to NCAA Division I programs. *Chapel Hill, NC: Center for Research in Intercollegiate Athletics*.
- NCAA. (2023, February. 13). *U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee and NCAA Office of Inclusion announce first-of-its-kind Paralympic sport advancements across three sports*. Author. <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2023/2/16/media-center-us-olympic-paralympic-committee-and-ncaa-office-of-inclusion-announce-first-of-its-kind-paralympic-sport-advancements-across-three-sports.aspx>
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2022). 2022-2023 NCAA Division III Manual. Author.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). *NCAA Division III 2020-21 Facts and Figures*.NCAA.org. https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/about/d3/D3_FactandFigures.pdf.

- NCAA. (n. d. a.). *Our three divisions*. Author. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2016/1/7/about-resources-media-center-ncaa-101-our-three-divisions.aspx>
- NCAA.(n.d.b.). *Student-Athletes with Disabilities*. Author. <https://d67oz7qfnvgpz.cloudfront.net/about/resources/inclusion/student-athletes-disabilities>
- National Wheelchair Basketball Association. (n.d.). *History of wheelchair basketball and NWBA*. Author. <https://www.nwba.org/history>
- Office of Civil Rights (2013, January 25). *Dear Colleague Letter: Students with Disabilities in extracellular activities*. Fact Sheet. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201301-504.html>
- Pac-12 Conference. (2023, January 24). *Pac-12 introduces Para athletes policy following proposal from Student-Athlete Leadership Team*. Author. <https://pac-12.com/article/2023/01/23/pac-12-introduces-para-athletics-policy-following-proposal-student-athlete>
- Proctor, L. D., Stokowski, S., McArdle, D. H., & Harrison, C. K. (2022). Why kinesiology and ath- letics departments should collaborate to advance health equity. In J. Sanderson & M. Weathers (Eds.), *Health Communication and Sport: Connections, Applications, and Opportunities* (pp. 95-106). Lexington Books.
- Rubin, L. M., Fuller, R. D., & Stokowski, S. (2022). “I might as well get my education”: The experiences of Black male Division III college athletes [Special Issue]. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 4(1), 17-36. <https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.04.01.03>
- Siegfried, N., Green, E., Swim, N., Montanaro, A., Greenwell, C., & Frederick, E. (2021). An examination of college adaptive sport sponsorship and the role of cause-related marketing. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 14, 483–500.
- Slater, D., & Meade, M. A. (2004). Participation in recreation and sports for persons with spinal cord injury: Review and recommendations. *NeuroRehabilitation*, 19(2), 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.3233/nre-2004-19206>
- Special Olympics*. (n.d.). *About*. Author. <https://www.specialolympics.org/about?locale=en>
- Stokowski, S. E. (2013). *I know I can learn: The experiences of NCAA Division I–FBS student-athletes with learning disabilities and/or ADHD in higher education*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Stokowski, S., Blunt-Vinti, H., Hardin, R., Goss, B. D., & Turk, M. (2017). I know I can learn: The perceptions of NCAA Division I football college athletes with learning disabilities [Special Issue]. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 95-118.
- Stokowski, S., Fridley, A., Croft, C., Stensland, P., & Arthur-Banning, S. G. (2022). Athlete identity and mental health among NCAA Division III student-athletes [Special Issue]. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 4(1), 71-82. <https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.04.01.06>
- Stokowski, S., Goldsmith, A., Croft, C., Hutchens, N. S., & Fridley, A. (2020). The impact of football on student-athletes with education-impacting disabilities. *Journal for the Study of Sport and Athletes in Education*, 14(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19357397.2020.1736488>
- Stokowski, S., & O'Donnell, S. (2022). Rethinking disability inclusion in intercollegiate athletics. *Sports Innovation Journal*, 3(SI), 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.18060/26004>
- Stokowski, S., Rudd, A., Corr, C., Jolly, K., & Fridley, A. (2023). Replicating inclusivity: The relationship between Directors’ Cup rankings and LGBTQIA+ inclusive NCAA athletic departments. *Journal of Education and Recreation Patterns (JERP)*, 4(1), 75-86. <https://doi.org/10.53016/jerp.v4i1.95>

- Watson, J. C. (2020). Uninspired: Framing wheelchair basketball and able-bodied basketball in college news sources. *Communication and Sport*, 8(4–5), 526–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519894669>
- Weiler, R., Verhagen, E., Taylor, A., & Ahmed, O. H. (2022). Monitoring the beautiful adapted game: a 3-year prospective surveillance study of injuries in elite English Para football. *Science and Medicine in Football*, 6(4), 415–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24733938.2021.1984556>
- Williams, P. (2013, January 25). *U.S. Department of Education Issues 'landmark' directive for disabled student athletes*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/highschools/us-department-of-education-issues-landmark-directive-for-disabled-student-athletes/2013/01/25/b03f5cae-6737-11e2-9e1b-07db1d2ccd5b_story.html
- Zabriskie, R., Lundberg, N., & Groff, D. (2005). Quality of life and identity: the benefits of a community-based therapeutic recreation and adaptive sports program. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 39(3), 176–191.

Copyright: © 2023 (Whaley, D., Davis, K., Schafer, A. R., King, D., Stokowski, S., & Godfrey, M.). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Authors' statements on ethics and conflict of interest

Ethics statement: We hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest declared by the authors.

Funding: None