Examining the Size and Scope of Youth Disability Sport

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Background and Literature Review

Starting in 2013, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) made a substantive commitment to examine the potential of disability sport. They held a summit on disability and collegiate athletics with a goal of developing a plan to determine the potential of NCAA recognition of disability sport and invited leaders within the disability sport community including athletes, program directors, and academic researchers. The topics addressed included participation at a youth level, current consideration of a collegiate level, and the feasibility of disability sport.

A review of the literature identifies that minimal research has been conducted on youth disability sport. Research indicates that socialization and self-confidence are direct benefits of youth disability sport participation (Martin, 2006; Martin & Smith, 2002; Shapiro & Martin, 2010). These benefits are more prevalent than if youth with disabilities only engage in physical activity instead of sport (Hutzer, Chacham-Guber & Reiter, 2013). Furthermore, social benefits and social acceptance are extended to peers without disabilities when they observe youth with disabilities engaging in wheelchair basketball (Uhutzler, Fliess-Douer, Avraham, Reiter, & Talmor, 2007). In summation, disability sport for youth provides benefits to participants and society while its research is still lacking.

Research on collegiate disability sport is almost exclusively focused more on athlete efficacy, with findings indicating that wheelchair sports are highly empowering (Blinde & Taub; Hargreaves & Hardin, 2009; Hardin & Hardin, 2004). However, little is known about the current status on collegiate wheelchair sports, or more importantly, the possibility of increasing and sustaining large-scale collegiate disability sport.

The NCAA Summit on Disability Sport identified multiple groups that could impact participation including athletes with early adults with acquired disabilities and international athletes. However, it was determined youth with congenital or early life acquired disabilities would be most impactful in providing participants in collegiate disability sport. The NCAA provided full funding for this project to better understand youth disability sport participation levels and its structure. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the participation and scope of youth disability sport participation in the United States.

This research addressed a number of questions and included the following:

1. Youth disability sport participation rates nation wise and by states,
2. Types of disabilities presented,
3. Sports in which youth athletes with disabilities participated,
4. Programmatic strategies for recruitment, and
5. Frequency of youth disability sport participation.

Method

Data was collected from April 2014 – June 2015 by one Graduate Assistant and four student employees all under faculty supervision. Programs that offered youth disability sport were identified through an extensive web search, word of mouth requests via identified contacts, and information from governing bodies. Organizations identified were teams, programs (which may offer programs to multiple teams and sports), high school athletic associations that offered disability sport, and athletic associations where athletes compete individually. In total, 732 organizations...
were identified and each organization was emailed three times and called twice. Still, 335 (45.7%) organizations did not complete the survey.

All organizations that completed the survey were categorized by size of organization, type of organization, recruitment efforts, size of community, and online and community presence (i.e. contacts with local rehabilitation hospitals). Then we researched the remaining 335 programs and categorized those based on online presence, size of community, and program type. These programs were estimated, in this way we were able to make a full estimate of disability sport participation. In addition, we asked each program what percentage, if any, of their participants also engaged with another program. For example, an athlete might play wheelchair basketball with two programs in a community or a wheelchair basketball program in one community and wheelchair tennis in another or possibly, three programs. This metric was used to minimize double counting of participants.

Results
The overall results may be better articulated in a table format but a brief written presentation will be provided here. After controlling for multi-sport participation, there are reported 45,411 participants and 16,700 estimated participants for a grand total of 62,112 participants across 50 states, including Washington DC and Puerto Rico. Colorado, Utah, and Texas had participation over representation based on their population with Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Nevada being underrepresented. The vast majority of participation is among those with mobility impairments, with blind and deaf participation being less than 9% of participation. Programs most frequently used word of mouth and web presence to attract new participants, with traditional efforts used to find adult participants such as rehabilitation hospitals and medical supply companies less impactful. Winter sports, aquatic sports, and archery were the most common sports noted.

Implications
Implications will be discussed in depth at the presentation, but in short, the levels of participation are more substantive than the researchers or the funding agency might have estimated. As the NCAA looks to develop and support disability sport, efforts should be made to draw congruency between sports for which they support championships and the most common feeder sports. In addition, efforts should be made to develop programs closer to the greatest critical mass of participants so that collegiate institutions can recruit locally.