Identifying Coach and School Characteristics That Facilitate the Development of NCAA Wheelchair Basketball Programs

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Approximately 12.6% of the United States’ (U.S.) population has a documented disability, 7.2% of whom are between the ages of 5 and 17 years (Kraus, 2016). Americans with a disability are almost three times more likely to be sedentary, compared to those without a disability (29% vs. 10%, respectively). A full 56% of persons with a disability do not engage in any physical activity, and only 23% are physically active for at least thirty minutes three or more times per week (Longmuir & Bar-Or, 1994). Increased sedentaryness may be due to lack of physical activity and athletic opportunities, despite the well-documented benefits athletic participation provides to persons with a disability. Among other benefits, sport participation can increase quality of life, reduce mood disturbances, and increase likelihood of being employed among persons living with a disability (Cote-Leclerc et al., 2017; Disabled Sports USA, 2018; Lundberg, Bennett, & Smith, 2011).

The United States has a longstanding tradition of supporting youth disability sports, with over 700 organizations serving more than 60,000 participants under the age of 18 annually. In contrast, the presence of intercollegiate programs is severely limited (Cottingham et al., 2015). Currently, there are more than 35,000 able-bodied students competing in basketball at over 1,000 U.S. colleges and universities (NCAA, 2018), but only 12 programs that participate in an intercollegiate wheelchair basketball (WB) league (NWBA, n.d.). An approximately equal number of colleges and universities offer intramural WB. These programs only support a couple hundred collegiate student-athletes annually. At the most elite level leading to the Paralympic Games, there are opportunities for athletes to compete on national teams, but there is a large gap between youth disability sports and the Paralympic Games. For disabled youth who wish to pursue their academic and athletic dreams in college, options are prohibitively limited.

Colleges are expected to provide sports participation opportunities to student-athletes with disabilities on an equal basis (Act, 1973; U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2013). Previous studies have shown that certain strategies can be leveraged to successfully develop WB as an NCAA “emerging sport” (Larkin, Cottingham, & Pate, 2014). Yet, little is known about adapted sports and their development in collegiate settings. This study aims to identify a range of factors that may contribute to future program proliferation. Coaches’ knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about athletes with disabilities as well as characteristics of athletic programs and campuses will be explored using qualitative research methods.

In-depth open-ended interviews and brief demographic surveys will be used to conduct comparative analyses of with twelve coaches of competitive collegiate basketball programs. Six coaches will be randomly selected from the list of 12 collegiate WB programs. These coaches will be matched with six basketball coaches from college athletic departments without WB based on characteristics such as geography, college and athletic department size, and conference membership. Transcribed and validated interview data will be analyzed for common themes. Themes will be discussed as they relate to inclusion of WB programs within collegiate athletic departments.