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

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Abstract

In the United States (US), 19% of college students reported having a disability (9.3% physical disability); yet less than 0.5% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions offer opportunities to participate in adaptive sports (Siegfried et al., 2021). Currently, there are approximately 500,000 NCAA student-athletes participating in 24 men’s and women’s sports across three divisions (I, II, III) at 1,113 member institutions (NCAA, n.d.; Siegfried et al., 2021). According to the Challenged Athletes Foundation (Challenged Athletes Foundation, n.d.), as of August 2019, there are 23 universities (among all NCAA divisions) that offer adaptive sport programs.

With this increase in reporting students with disabilities and specialized program development in the country, the implementation of adaptive sports within higher educational organizations requires administrators be persistently active in order to maintain policy, develop procedure and offer equitable opportunities for all students enrolled at their university (Kim et al., 2022; Stokowski & O’Donnell, 2022). Division III is the NCAA’s largest division, with more than 186,415 student-athletes competing in 19 sports at 442 membership institutions (NCAA, n.d.). This education forward model allows for student-athletes to focus on their academics in order to fulfill their ultimate goal of obtaining a degree. (NCAA, n.d.). As stated in the Division III philosophy, institutions focus on providing an inclusive environment, where student-athletes take on responsibilities related to following their passion and discovering their potential through a comprehensive educational experience (NCAA, n.d.). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand Division III athletic administrators’ perceptions of collegiate adaptive sports.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Division III athletic administrators from different institutions. A thematic (both inductive and deductive) analysis was used for this study as it is one of the first studies conducted on the perceptions of athletic administration personnel on collegiate adaptive sports programs at the Division III level. Trustworthiness and validity of the data were determined using triangulation, member checks, and reflexivity.
The conducted interviews indicated a multitude of factors that influence athletic administration personnel perceptions of collegiate adaptive sports at the Division III level. Throughout the data, four main themes (lack of knowledge, how, impact, and resources) and three sub themes within resources (financial, space/facilities, and faculty/staff support) emerged.

The prevalence of discussion regarding this topic will presumably continue to gain relevance and become a common avenue of increasing the dialogue that is predicated on education, development, diversity, and inclusion at Division III universities. This continued dialogue will offer the opportunity for students with disabilities to have a heightened sense of community and belonging as it pertains to their own well-being and the promotion of their perspective and shared experiences while considering different elements of competition and individual expression. Division III universities stand to benefit from the addition of adaptive sports and further research about the topic when considering the different factors that are considered in this research and associated studies such as enrollment and the student development to supplement the areas in which DIII sports programs intend to serve and exist.