

University sports administrators' perceptions on campus recreation services for students with physical disabilities

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Abstract

Tertiary institutions experience increased enrolment of students with physical disabilities, yet inclusion of these students in campus activities remains problematic. The introduction of strategically managed campus recreation programmes would eliminate some of the barriers for students with disabilities, creating a climate of campus community. Little research has been conducted on this topic at South African universities. This study, therefore, explored the perceptions of sports administrators at Western Cape tertiary institution on the provision of campus recreation services to students with physical disabilities. A qualitative approach was followed and five sports administrators were interviewed. A thematic approach was used to analyse data through the lens of the campus culture of compassion theoretical framework. Findings indicated that students with physical disabilities did not have access to recreational services on campus. Reasons included poor financial support and a lack of administrators' skills and interest to conform to their social responsibility by providing these activities. The institution strategically and financially supports mainly the academic development of students. It is recommended that the institution revise their vision supporting sports administrators to develop a sustainable inclusive campus recreation plan.

Keywords: Campus recreation, intramural sports, recreation services, physical disability, physical impairment, tertiary institutions

Introduction

Tertiary institutions are experiencing an unprecedented increase in the enrolment of students with physical disabilities (Reupert, Hemmings & Connors, 2010). This could be the result of a combination of legislative, academic and social changes that increased the number of individuals with disabilities enrolling at higher education institutions (Wilson, Getzel & Brown, 2000). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2011: 7), disability is used '*as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.*' Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers (WHO, 2011).

Although the presence of students with disabilities on campus is steadily increasing, a study conducted by McCarthy and Drover (2010) found that inclusion of students with disabilities in campus activities at Canadian Universities, are still problematic. Much has to be done to improve the campus climate creating a welcoming environment for all students and ensuring the inclusion of disabled students in campus life. The barriers that students with disabilities experience within the

university include physical and social constraints such as social integration and support, lack of time, communication barrier between student with disabilities and the sport administrators, lack of skills, financial constraints, lack of awareness of available programs and of specialised developing programs as well as access to facilities not creating a user friendly environment (Gillies, 2009; Wright, 2007). Generally participation in sport and recreation prior to entering university would depend on the social support they received at school and at home (Wright, 2007). This could also serve as a barrier based on previous experiences. Some of the social constraints that may be dealt with or minimized would be the parental influence, cultural stereotypes, and attitudes of others towards female recreational sports, body image, as well as acceptance in the society and the change of mind set towards people with disabilities. Therefore the introduction of strategically managed campus recreation by the tertiary institution with its practical implementation by the sports administrators would help eliminate some of these barriers of campus inclusion creating a climate of campus community (Wright, 2007).

Campus recreation is defined as a program that uses diverse facilities and programs to promote the physical, emotional, and social growth of people by encouraging the development of lifelong skills and attitudes of students through recreational activities (Mittelstaedt et al., 2006; Bloland, 1987). The primary reason for the existence of sport and recreation at universities are the educational values it imparts to the students (Coakley, 2001). According to Mittelstaedt et al. (2006), campus recreation may be used to provide

extracurricular education opportunities through participation in campus recreation. The introduction of campus recreation to tertiary institutions is further a way of creating a sense of belonging. The National Intramural Recreational Sport Association (NIRSA,1996) indicated that campus recreation professionals could play a huge role in looking after the health and well-being (i.e. positive self-image, stronger social interactive skills, enhanced physical fitness and good mental health) of their campus communities by providing opportunities for participation in a variety of activities that satisfy the diverse needs of students. Asihel (2005) indicated that campus recreation managers should ensure that assessment and evaluation of campus recreation programs take place to determine whether and to what degree the program participation goals as well as learning and development outcomes are met. Asihel (2005) further states that students with disabilities should be involved in the assessment and review of the programs at regular intervals to ensure their needs are met.

The institution at which this study was conducted, established an office for students with disabilities ensuring that, prior to enrolment, students are individually assessed and those with physical impairments are identified. Tailor-made programmes are then designed to foster the development of each student to their full potential (UWC, 2013). The main purpose of this unit however, is to provide academic support to these students and furthermore to ensure that the teaching and learning venues are accessible to persons with mobility impairment. Yet, according to a study conducted by Laka (2009), recreational programmes were not channelled to those

students who were identified with any physical impairment. Furthermore, Wright (2007) concluded that the main reasons for non-participation of students with disabilities in campus recreation were due to a communication barrier that exists between the participants and the University sports administrators. Wright (2007) further noted that financial barriers prevented students from participating in recreational activities. The lack of skills and the attitude of other students also negatively affected participation. Wright (2007) and Laka (2009) indicated that campus recreation will only become accessible to students with disabilities once communication channels are established between disabled students and sports administrators, making recreation development demand-driven and student-based. Involving students with disabilities in the planning process would ensure that the needs and wants of students are taken into consideration when developing recreational programmes and facility accessibility around campus.

Research conducted by Titlebaum, Brennan and Chynoweth (2002), indicated that disabled students might be overlooked by sports administrators if they don't request these services, allowing the administrators to think that the programs provided are sufficient and successfully meeting the needs of this population. Very little research has been conducted with regards to the provision of recreational services to disabled students at tertiary institutions in South Africa. This resulted in asking: "What are the perceptions of sports administrators with regard to the provision of campus recreation services to students with physical disabilities fostering a campus culture of compassion?" In an attempt

to answer the research question, this study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions of sports administrators at a university in the Western Cape on the provision of campus recreation services to students with physical disabilities as a means to create a campus culture of compassion, as described in the framework developed by Gillies (2009).

The framework developed by Gillies (2009) identifies how universities can implement programs, policies, services and practices that better respond to the changing and diverse needs and interests of students with disabilities in order to ensure their full engagement in all areas of campus life. The framework centres around six guiding principles that help guide universities toward developing a campus culture that is compassionate. Essentially, a campus culture of compassion values: access for all; diversity and uniqueness; interdependence and social responsibility; diverse knowledge basis, voices, and perspectives; the power of learning and education as a tool for social change; and the whole person. The framework also indicates three fundamental characteristics that a campus culture of compassion must possess. In essence, post-secondary institutions and their community members must be: interconnected, supportive and enabling, and informed. Six process pieces are included in the framework which enables a campus culture of compassionate to be fuelled and sustained over time. These pieces include: creating a vision for the future, constructing a plan to achieve the vision, securing funds to put the plan in place, thinking critically and measuring actions against the vision, being proactive to make change happen, and reaching beyond

compliance. The framework encourages university stakeholders to collectively reflect, dialogue, and collaborate in order to create broader systemic changes. These changes are necessary since constraints to campus engagement can threaten a student's well-being and sense of self. This framework can serve as a starting point to initiate these conversations and inspire universities to use a participatory approach to encourage positive social change within the university context.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study an exploratory qualitative research design was followed using semi-structured interviews to investigate the perceptions and experiences of sport administration staff at the University of the Western Cape on the provision of campus recreation services to students with disabilities. This method of data collection allowed participants to respond to the questions in their own words and for the researcher to probe the participants to gather more meaningful data (Blankenship, 2010).

There were only five sports administrators permanently employed by the institution at the time of the research project and all were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Other staff members who were on part time contracts were excluded from the study. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant, making use of an interview guideline which was according to the campus culture of compassion framework developed by Gillies (2009). This format allowed participants to reflect on their own perceptions and experiences on the aim of the study.

All interviews were tape-recorded, with permission from the participants, and transcribed verbatim for the use by the researchers. Trustworthiness and credibility were ensured through membership checks, giving the transcribed data back to the participants to reflect on the accuracy of the recordings, a reflective attitude was adopted by the researchers to prevent bias, making use of peer reviews and debriefing sessions. A thematic approach was followed to analyse the data making use of predetermined themes that derived from the analytical framework of Gillies (2009). These themes were not considered in isolation of each other. Instead themes were viewed interchangeably.

Results and discussion

The results and findings of this research study are presented in a qualitative thematic form. It further discussed the participants, perceptions, interpretations and experiences of the provision of campus recreation to students with disabilities. The participants' quotes are presented in italics, to distinguish them from the literature within the discussion session.

Gillies (2009) developed a framework creating a campus culture of compassion, believing that campus recreation could be enhanced through the application thereof into the service delivery for students with disabilities at a university. The framework consists of three parts that also forms the themes for this study: Part 1. guiding principles focusing on core values of a campus community; Part 2. characteristics of campus culture of compassion that involves a supportive, enabling, interconnected and informed campus community; and Part 3.

process pieces involving reaching beyond compliance, securing funding, creating a vision for the future, being proactive in making change happen, construction of a plan to achieve the vision, and critical thinking and measurement of actions against the vision (Gillies, 2009). Results from this study are discussed in terms of the predetermined themes which go in accordance or fit into the values stipulated by Gillies' framework for a campus culture of compassion towards students with disabilities for a better service delivery and integration to campus community.

Theme 1: Guiding principle

Gillies (2009) indicated that the guiding principles that are used to assist universities toward developing a campus culture that is compassionate towards students with disabilities, as well as those discriminated against, the principle includes the following values: (a) access for all; (b) diversity and uniqueness; (c) interdependence and social responsibility; (d) diverse knowledge basis, voices and perspectives; (e) the power of learning and education as a tool for social change; and (f) the whole person.

Campus recreation & Services

Taking these values in consideration, sports administrators were asked: *"How did the university come to develop its current recreation programs (specifically those accessible for students with disabilities) and what was it like previously?"* Majority participants indicated that although the university's sports administration department offered campus recreation in the format of

campus leagues and special tournaments, these programs and events were not accessible to students with disabilities. Sports administrators stated that they did not present recreation programs to students with disabilities and the reasons were that the Sport Administration department *“is not equipped to deal with students with disabilities, there is no proper infrastructure and no efficient resources, more specifically money to put programs in place meeting the needs of students with disabilities”*. They further commented that *“the recreation programmes are not inclusive; it’s just general recreation programs... they still need to be separated in order to cater for those with disabilities”*. One of the sports administrators clearly stated that the sports administration department lacked to look into sport for disabled students as the IOP goals were not aligned to reaching students with physical disabilities through campus recreation. Outsiders however, make use of the facilities to present programs for people with disabilities from outside the campus but no effort is made to sustain such programs on campus or to share the knowledge with employed sports administrators to empower them to present recreational programs to students with disabilities. Sports administrators thus have different perceptions regarding the provision of services and making facilities accessible to students with physical disabilities, but it is evident that there was an absence of recreation programs being channelled to students with physical disabilities (Laka, 2009).

Theme 2: Campus Culture

Campus culture of compassion (part 2) is characterized as a supportive and enabling campus community, an interconnected campus community and an informed campus community.

Social integration/benefits

Sports administrators were further asked *“What was the level of involvement of various university stakeholders in regard to creating current programs?”* These findings implied that social integration is not taking place as the needs of students with physical disabilities are not being satisfied. It further implies that they do not have the opportunity to engage in meaningful recreation in order to develop and enhance their physical, mental or emotional capacity or to develop mechanisms to cope with the constant demand related to campus life Mittelstaedt *et al.* (2006). Responses from a specific administrator indicated that there was *“minimal involvement from sports administrators as well as from other stakeholders in the university”* and *“from a leadership aspect of the university mainly the student representative council”*. Most sports administrators were in agreement that there is a need for engagement to take place between different role players at the university to provide the necessary services to students with physical disabilities. Collaboration and communication infrastructure should therefore be developed to add value to the lives of the students (Iso-Ahola, 1980).

Role of education and campus recreation programs for the physically disabled students

The main purpose of tertiary institutions is to develop individuals' intellectual capital, of which recreation is one of the tools to enhance the education experience of all students, including students with disabilities (Coakley, 2001). This calls for students with disabilities to be treated equally and be given the opportunity to be educated in order to become more confident in pursuing their dreams and to be socially accepted (McCarthy & Drover, 2010). The second phase of Gillies' (2009) framework highlighted that the institution and the community must be (a) interconnected, (b) supportive and enabling, as well as (c) informed. Sports administrators were therefore asked *"What barriers/challenges do you face in providing accessible, inclusive or equitable programming?"* The main reason presented by sports administrators was that campus *"sport administration is not equipped to deal with disabled students, and that the university's goal was towards academics and not more unto sports, considering the history of the university...and therefore a large amount of the money being pumped into the university is directed towards the improvement of education rather than into sports and the development and improvement of infrastructure to be more inclusive of students with physical disabilities and to provide training to current sports administrators"*. Due to these constraints, sports administrators indicated that even though there was an effort to provide cricket to visually impaired students *"there were no support or interest from the leadership to continue with the cricket for the semi-blind,*

secondly there was no money to sustain the program which lead to no equipment and other aspects like safety procedures that would be required to be put in place". It is therefore postulated that sports administrators are not receiving the necessary support from university management to develop recreation programs for students with disabilities and although the university has programs in place to support these students academically, these students are still marginalised and prevented from experiencing a campus life of compassion. Sports administrators and university management should therefore be informed of the students with disabilities in order to overcome the barriers students with disabilities experience. Results, however, indicated that although the university has a centre for students with disabilities that provides a program to foster the development of each student to their full potential, sports administrators have no future plans to make sport facilities more accessible or to provide programs to students with disabilities as they feel they are not informed of the number of students with disabilities, their various physical disabilities and their needs.

Theme 3: Process pieces

In order for a campus culture of compassion to be fostered and sustained it is necessary for the institution to (a) create a vision for the future, (b) construct a plan to achieve the vision, (c) secure funds to put the plan in place, (d) think critically and measure actions against the vision, (e) be proactive to make change happen and (f) reach beyond compliance (Gillies, 2009).

Barriers to the provision of campus recreation to students with physical disabilities

Results indicated that sports administrators are faced with barriers preventing them to provide accessible, inclusive or equitable programming to students with physical disability. Some of these barriers include the time scheduling of practices for the university teams making the facilities inaccessible to other students for recreational activities. The same participant further stated that: *“to offer campus recreation you need specialised programs and specialised employees to be able to work with students with disabilities”*. They also lack the equipment to present such activities. It was further stated that other stakeholders such as the Central House Committee, Sports Council, Residential and Catering Services and respective faculties on campus arrange their own recreation programs without corresponding or including other stakeholders or the sport administration department which made the slogan of *“one department, one event”* more prominent. This implies that various departments offer programs but do not integrate their efforts resulting in the exclusion of students into programs. The participant stated that sports administrators and some stakeholders may be reluctant to *“talk about it, and if you don’t have the disability you don’t care”* which is how our society has turned out to be.

Physical/ social Constraints

Communication between stakeholders are therefore seen as the biggest barrier for presenting campus recreation as it prevents sports administrators from learning from other

units like the Occupational Therapy (OT) as to how to treat or develop programs for students with disabilities. Sports administrators are thus constrained by the lack of time, skills, finance, administrative barriers and awareness of programs and development of programs that are directed to students with physical disabilities. Sports administrators further reiterated that *“no recreation program goals were set according to the IOP goals to reach the physically disabled students through campus recreation”*. The institution thus lacks the vision of social inclusion to address the inequalities in the provision of campus recreation for students with disabilities. In asking sports administrators *“What recommendations do you have on how to improve current programming and make recreation even more inclusive and accessible?”*, they emphasised the importance of *“having the support and the involvement of the individuals and leadership”* and more specifically a communication link with the *“office for students with disabilities”* in order to acquire the training needed to work with students with disabilities and to offer recreation programs to them, they went further by saying things need to be more clustered together instead of being far from each other in order to gain more participants and awareness of all campus recreation programs. Participant C stated the university needed to shift from residence sport to campus sport, to allow student involvement, this move may be beneficial in terms of encouraging fun, enjoyment and recreation.

Conclusion

It was expected that the sports administrators at the tertiary institution under study, would have been more compassionate in their value system ensuring that all students, irrespective of their ability, would have been catered for in all sports codes. However, findings indicated that students with physical disabilities were not provided for in terms of access to recreational activities on campus. This problem is not new to this institution as studies conducted by Wright (2007) and Laka (2009) at the same institution resulted in similar findings. The reasons provided for this exclusion of physical disabled students in campus recreation were due to poor financial support and a lack of skills of the sports administrators to provide these activities. It could thus be said that this institution does not adhere to the guiding principles of Gillies (2009) in valuing a culture of compassion towards students with disabilities. Sports administrators were of opinion that the management team of the university could act in a more socially responsible manner by providing financial support to the sports administration unit to train their staff in disabled recreational sport in order to ensure access to all, diversity, interdependence, social change and providing opportunities for all students do develop holistically. Better communication between different units on campus is necessary as indicated by Iso-Ahola (1980) to ensure that the voice of physical disabled students is heard and that their need for inclusion in campus recreation is highlighted.

Findings further reiterated that the institution under investigation do not support the development of students at all levels as

funding was mostly allocated to academic development and little if anything to develop campus recreation for all students. This is not unexpected as the main purpose of an institution is to develop individual's intellectual capital, as indicated by Coakley (2001). However, development of an individual's capital does not only include academic development. Research conducted by Mittelstaedet al. (2006) and Bloland (1987) highlighted the importance of students' participation in campus recreation in that it fosters physical, emotional, and social growth of people, encouraging the development of lifelong skills and attitudes of students through recreational activities. Management should be informed of the benefits of investing in campus recreation for all students in order to support the holistic development of the students by providing an enabling environment and fostering an interconnectedness between academic programs and recreation participation as well as between abled and disabled students.

The institution investigated has a well-developed institutional plan (IOP) and is a leader in the field of science, which conforms to the policies of Higher Education in South Africa. However, taking into consideration the increase in students with disabilities at educational institutions (Reupert, Hemmings& Connors, 2010; Welson, Getzel& Brown, 2000), it would have been expected that the institution incorporated the inclusion of development of students with disabilities at all levels, including campus recreation or recreational sport, and not just on the academic front. Results indicate the opposite occurs, with no inclusion of disabled sport on campus as a vision to develop these students

holistically. The implication thereof results in the barriers experienced by sports administrators with different units on campus providing their own activities without communicating with sport administration or including them in their quest to provide programs to these students. It is therefore recommended that the institution revise their vision to incorporate campus recreation for all in their institutional plan and to provide the necessary support to the sport administration unit to develop a social inclusion campus recreation plan that would be sustainable. This would include the development of the necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with physical disabilities, training of

sports administrators to facilitate the necessary programs and the provision of financial support to sustain these programs on campus. Sports administrators should, as a result, draft a strategic management campus recreation programme that should be aligned with the vision of the university and the needs of disabled students.

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