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Understanding Para-Athlete Inclusion in Post-Secondary Athletics

by

Rayven J. Sample

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Department of Education

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Approved by:

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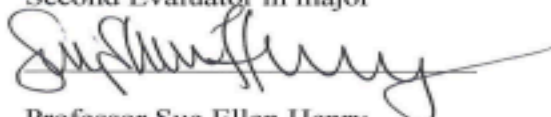
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Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	3
Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
History of the Paralympic Movement.....	7
Collegiate Inclusion.....	8
Implementation of Para-Inclusion.....	9
Methods.....	11
Type of Study and Rationale.....	11
Participants.....	12
Interviews.....	15
Analysis of Data.....	16
Results.....	16
Disability Mindset.....	17
Labels.....	17
Perceptions.....	18
Disability Education.....	20
Inclusion.....	21
Exclusion.....	24
Ableism.....	27
Discussion.....	30
Limitations.....	32
Conclusions and Direction for Future Inquiry.....	33
References.....	35
Appendix A. Para-Athletics Classifications.....	38
Appendix B. Para-Athlete Interview Protocol.....	40

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Classifications

Table 2. Participants

Table 3. Para-Athlete Identity

Abstract

This qualitative study utilized thematic analysis of six interviews with elite Para-athletes who were currently enrolled at a four-year undergraduate institution and were actively competing or training in any Para-sport to understand inclusion of Para-athletes within the NCAA. This investigatory research sought to identify barriers present in the NCAA's structure and advocate for positive change as more Para-athletes desire to access collegiate athletic resources due to increasingly higher standards of performance within Para-sport. Para-athletes discussed five key themes during interviews; "Disability Mindset" or the way athletes conceptualized their presence within the athletic environment; sources of education available to athletics staff or departments about Para-athletes; inclusion of Para-athletes; exclusion of Para-athletes; and, ableism experienced by Para-athletes. This study found a lack of proper education surrounding Para-athletes, lack of equitable treatment between able-bodied and Para-athletes in post-secondary athletics and little enforcement by the NCAA to ensure inclusion, with discretion being given to institutions' athletic departments.

Introduction

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is a key component of collegiate-level athletics, acting as an industry leader for governing the operations of sport at post-secondary institutions. Able-bodied athletics events have been hosted by the NCAA since 1906 and over 1000 post-secondary institutions are members of this organization. In the 2022-2023 academic year, the NCAA reports that 526,084 student-athletes competed across all sports and all athletic divisions (NCAA, 2022). Student-athletes competing at NCAA member institutions gain access to high-level facilities, coaching and team environment that can aid with training. It is not uncommon for institutions to offer academic support to student-athletes to offset stresses created by the increased demands introduced by training schedules or travel schedules. It is expected that student-athletes in the NCAA are proficient on the athletic field and academic classroom. The NCAA resources provided to able-bodied athletes for decades has created a hotbed for athletic excellence. The organization proudly has high representation on Team USA's Olympic rosters, with the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games consisting of 75% former or current NCAA athletes (NCAA, 2021).

The Paralympics is a quadrennial sporting championship for athletes with physical disabilities that occurs following the Olympics, a championship for the world's able-bodied athletes. Para-sport by extension encompasses the competitions held outside of this major event that are designed to allow for individuals with disabilities to compete in sport. The individuals competing in these events are known as Para-athletes and a wide array of disabilities are represented. Para-athletes can be ambulatory or seated and may or may not require accommodations to compete. The modern Paralympics has grown increasingly competitive in nature and has grown to mirror the Olympic cornerstones of "Faster, Stronger, Higher" while

maintaining its own objective of advocacy for disability inclusion through the means of sport. The increasingly higher standards of performance within Para-sport has caused Para-athletes to require resources to aid in their athletic pursuits such as training venues and high-level coaching.

While the record of Olympic excellence stemming from the NCAA has been emphasized by the organization, the inclusion of Para-athletes within post-secondary athletics has been quiet in comparison. As the Paralympics has become increasingly competitive, the desire of elite Para-athletes to join the NCAA has grown. This study sought to understand how Para-athletes conceptualized their athletic involvement and how inclusion for Para-athletes is being actively implemented at member institutions through utilization of thematic analysis on interviews with athletes who were actively enrolled in an undergraduate degree program while continuing their athletic endeavors. The findings of this study intend to highlight the barriers faced by Para-athletes and advocate for changes in the NCAA's structure to improve the Para-athlete experience.

Literature Review

Research associated with Para-sport to date has been heavily focused on the historical review of the Paralympic movement (Brittain, 2009), the impacts of media coverage on disability acceptance (Pullen et al., 2020) or inquiries on the classification system of the Paralympics (Mann et al., 2021). The Paralympic movement's ability to function as a tool to advance the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities has only recently been identified and focused on (Bantjes & Swartz, 2018). The history of the Paralympic movement will be discussed to contextualize the large scale shifts in narrative around Para-sport. Past efforts to promote inclusion within collegiate sports are discussed to frame the effectiveness of modern implementation for Para-inclusion within post-secondary athletics.

History of the Paralympic Movement

The Paralympic Movement is focused on advocating for disability rights through the usage of sport as a showcasing device. The narratives around this goal have historically been centered on rehabilitation and inclusion then athletic excellence. This has taken the form of multiple primary messages throughout different points within its more than half a century lifespan. Paralympic history can be viewed in two distinct time frames that influence each other but have their own separate goals.

The messaging delivered by Dr. Guttman at the original Stoke Mandeville Games (a precursor to the current Paralympic Games) positioned the event as an opportunity for disabled individuals to engage in rehabilitation through their involvement in sport (Brittain, 2009). This generalized narrative continued throughout the earliest days of the movement. Overtime, social inclusion for individuals with disabilities grew as an objective for the movement as leaders framed the event as “Olympics for the Disabled”. This was reluctantly permitted by the International Olympic Committee who at the time did not have strong ties to the movement. This middle era consisted of promoting the capabilities of persons with disabilities. A platform grew that rested upon the notion that if individuals were able to participate in sport, then their acceptance within society should be established.

The 2000’s represented a shift within the messaging surrounding the Paralympic Games. As viewership increasingly rose, the movement began an “Olympification” process where the performance of their athletes was emphasized more heavily compared to only celebrating their participation. (Brittain & Beacom, 2016) In this system, athletes began obtaining descriptions of “elite” by the media and this was closely associated with the increased proximity of the Paralympics to the Olympics through the governing bodies of the International Paralympic

Committee and International Olympic Committee. The “supercrip” narrative emerged as a result of this “Olympification” and positions the stories of athletes to be heroic or inspirational by emphasizing the struggles encountered by the athlete then comparing this to their athletic achievements (McGillivray et al., 2021). The “supercrip” therefore is not the norm for persons with disabilities but represents the possibility that individuals with disabilities can rise above their circumstances with hard work.

Collegiate Inclusion

The National Collegiate Athletic Association is undoubtedly a central figure within collegiate athletics with the organization’s position as the leading governing body for student-athletes across the United States of America. The initiatives taken by this organization have nation-wide, sweeping implications for collegiate athletics. In the current day, little has been done by the NCAA to promote inclusion of disabled athletes within its structures despite bylaws such as 20.10.1.9 The Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion, that promise a commitment “to the core values of diversity, inclusion and equity, because realization of those values improves the learning environment for all student-athletes and enhances excellence within the membership and in all aspects of intercollegiate athletics”(NCAA, 2013). As the population of undergraduate college students with disabilities has risen to around 20% (Stokowski & O’Donnell, 2022) and the Paralympic Movement shifts to an Olympic framework of demanding athletic excellence, it becomes more important for the NCAA to expand its programming to incorporate Para-sport (McGinniss et al., 2020).

The Eastern Collegiate Athletics Conference (ECAC) spearheaded the implementation of increased Para-inclusion with the NCAA in the early 2010’s. The efforts of the ECAC allowed for participation of disabled athletes in championship events across multiple sports (McGinniss

et al., 2020). The initiative failed as a limited number of Para-athletes competed within the NCAA at that time and the conference abandoned the effort. Recently, the NCAA has begun endorsing competitions of Para-athletes by hosting events for wheelchair racing, wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis at three events. The wheelchair basketball event is an exhibition game at the Division II and Division III NCAA Women's Basketball Championships where players from the National Wheelchair Basketball Association and NCAA play against each other. In Para-track and field, their efforts are limited to promoting Drake Relays track meet where wheelchair racers were invited to compete for the Para-college wheelchair national champion titles (NCAA, 2023). It must be noted that both events are not held at a Division I National Championship and the wheelchair basketball event is an exhibition competition, not a championship competition. Though member institutions of the NCAA have agency to help aid inclusion through development of existing programs, there is little evidence to suggest that this development is taking place, though small changes have the potential to make a big impact. An increase of only 10% in the number of participating institutions would provide approximately two or three opportunities per state for Para-athletes (Fay, 2011).

Implementation of Para-Inclusion

Para-Inclusion at the collegiate level, while relatively small and new, has potential for growth. Shapiro, Pate & Cottingham (2020) surveyed campus recreation employees at institutions with more than 5,000 enrolled students and found that a key issue facing the implementation of adaptive programs is a voiced demand for the programs, proper supporting staff and funding to ensure smooth operations. This survey was online and participation was voluntary, leading to a possible response bias of staff who positively viewed adaptive programming. The results of this study indicate that given opportunities, there is willingness to

expand recreational activity to individuals with disabilities at academic institutions (Shapiro et al., 2020). This does not however address the needs of elite Para-athletes who require more resources to effectively train and compete. Adjacent, Wekesser, Costa, Pasik & Erikson (2023) surveyed able-bodied former volunteers at The Michigan State University Adaptive Sports and Recreation Club and found themes that emphasized the positive outcomes experienced by the volunteers that expanded their understanding of disability, developed a motivation to continue working with persons with disabilities or assisting in developing skills necessary for their future employment endeavors. The results from this data create an optimistic possibility that when similar programs are developed, there will be positive outcomes for volunteers or staff associated with the newly forming initiatives. If there is proper implementation, those involved will have beneficial experiences.

A weakness of the current body of literature is the lack of first-hand accounts from athletes who were a part of post-secondary athletics. No study directly spoke to athletes to identify what measures have been taken to promote or prevent their inclusion in existing structures. The prior attempts of athletic conferences such as the ECAC to develop inclusive representation of Para-athletes at their events or the NCAA's recent efforts to highlight Para-sport at able-bodied events indicates willingness to adopt Para-sport into the collegiate system. Recreation staff and volunteer employees have been surveyed with results indicating positive, hopeful outlooks on the implementation of inclusion. Capturing an athlete's experiences fills the current gap in the research by providing a frame of reference for future advocacy.

Methods

Type of Study and Rationale

As has been established above, examining the experiences of elite Para-athletes can highlight areas of improvement or failures to aid in future development. The purpose of this study was to investigate Para-athletes enrolled at a four-year undergraduate institution whose athletics department is a member of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Because this is an emerging area of study, a qualitative approach was used to identify themes and possible directions for future research. Purposive sampling was adopted to identify and recruit athletes for participation in this study. A phenomenological framework for qualitative research was used to understand the lived experiences of athletes. Purposive sample was used to select specific criteria that was determined to best fit research goals and account for the limited population of disabled athletes currently pursuing undergraduate degrees. The criteria for selection were as follows: the individuals must have been a full-time student at their institution, had been currently competing or training in any Para-sport and considered “elite” in their primary sport. Individuals identified as “elite” consist of any athlete who had been nominated to their respective governing body’s National Team roster or represented their country at a high level International competition (Paralympic Games, World Championships, Parapan American Games, ect.). Given the investigatory nature of this study, thematic analysis was used to systematically interpret texts to identify patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis was conducted on collected data to understand how Para-inclusion differs between collegiate and non-collegiate groups.

Participants

Team USA's Tokyo Paralympic Games delegation consisted of 234 athletes, 62 of those athletes competed in track and field making Para-Athletics the largest team roster out of the 19 Para-sports represented by Team USA athletes. Due to this and the widespread availability of able-bodied track and field programs at NCAA schools, the decision was made to focus on this singular Para-sport in the sample. 6 athletes were selected from the publicly available National Team, Tokyo Paralympic Games, Paris 2023 World Championship, and Santiago 2023 Parapan American Games rosters. The 6 participants who responded for an interview are ambulatory athletes and persons with cerebral palsy ($n = 1$), impaired upper limb range of motion ($n = 1$), visual impairment ($n = 2$) or an amputee ($n = 2$). Visually impaired athletes compete without the assistance of a guide. Amputee athletes compete with the assistance of a "running blade" prosthetic leg. Interview transcripts were subdivided into two groups, NCAA athletes ($n = 4$) and non-NCAA athletes ($n = 2$). It is imperative to note that while all participants were Para-athletes, the needs of each athlete differed dramatically based on their disability. World Para Athletics (the global governing body for Para-Athletics) has developed "Classification" criteria that assigns a number in the T (track) or F (field) disciplines corresponding to the athlete's impairment. While athletes can have the same disability (ie, visual impairment), they may be placed into different numerical classifications (ie, T11, T12 or T13) based upon the severity of their impairment. This can directly lead to athletes needing more or less accommodations within an athletic setting despite having the same generalized disability. Appendix A provides a full overview of the classifications in track events for Para-Athletics (International Paralympic Committee, 2024)(LEXI, 2024), Table 1 provides information about the classifications present within this study. As a rule of thumb, the lower the number within a grouping of classifications, the higher

the impairment for athletes classified. Using the previous example for vision impairment, T11 is the most severely impaired and all athletes are required to wear blacked-out glasses and run with a guide. T12 athletes have moderate visual impairment and have the choice to run with or without a guide. T13 is the least severely impaired classification and runs independently without a guide.

Table 1. Participant Classifications

Classification	IPC Definition	Criteria
T11-T13	Vision Impairment	T11 - Near total visual impairment, athletes require blacked-out glasses and guides T12 - Moderate visual impairment, choice to compete with or without guide T13 - Least visual impairment, competes independently
T35-T38	Co-ordination impairments (hypertonia, ataxia and athetosis)	T35 - moderate impairment to lower limbs resulting in a fast, short stride T36 - low to moderate impairment of all four limbs T37 - moderate impairment to upper and lower limbs of one side T38 - low impairment to one half of the body
T45-47	Upper limb/s affected by limb deficiency, impaired muscle power or impaired passive range of movement	T45 - high impairment of both upper limbs T46 - moderate to high impairment of one arm above the elbow T47 - low to moderate impairment of one arm below the elbow

T61-64	Lower limb/s competing with prosthesis affected by limb deficiency and leg length difference	T61 - double above knee impairment T62 - double below knee impairment T63 - single above knee impairment T64 - single below knee impairment
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6 college-age elite Para track and field athletes (3 men, 3 women) participated in semistructured interviews with questions focused on capturing their athletic and academic experiences while attempting to continue athletic excellence; Table 2 provides basic background information about each athlete. This includes their accolades, institution type, a short description of their disability, roster status on their institution's collegiate team, primary disciplines and an ID number that substitutes for legal names.

Table 2. Participants

Athlete ID	Institution	Disability	Discipline
CPA1*^	Division I (Mid-Major transferred to Power 5)	Low impairment Upper Limb Range of Motion	Jumps
CPA2*^	Division I (Mid-Major)	Low impairment Vision Impairment	Sprints
CPA3+	Division III	Double Below Knee Amputee	Sprints
CPA4+	Division I (Mid-Major)	Low impairment Cerebral Palsy	Jumps / Sprints
NPA5*+	Division I (Power 5)	Low impairment Vision Impairment	Distance
NPA6*+	Division I (Power 5)	Single Below Knee Amputee	Sprints

C = Collegiate Elite Para-Athlete , N = Non-collegiate Elite Para-Athlete

*Denotes Paralympian

^Denotes Paralympic Games and/or World Championship Medalist

+Denotes Parapan American Games Medalist

Interviews

Approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Bucknell University. All participants of this research were provided confidentiality. An informed consent document was provided and signed by each interviewee prior to the beginning of an interview. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in a private setting. Meetings were recorded and transcribed using artificial intelligence. Transcripts were manually reread and minor errors were corrected. All participants were given 14 days to approve and edit the transcript prior to it being deemed finalized. Participants were instructed to provide their responses and expand upon the questions as desired; participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question for any reason and were free to discontinue the interview at any time. Appendix B contains the semistructured interview protocol which can be divided into four major categories. “Experience and Accolades” is intended to capture the entire athletic history of each participant while providing space for them to reflect upon their involvement in sport. “Post-Secondary Academics” asked basic identifying questions about the participant’s academic pursuits and questioned the dynamics of balancing academics with athletics. “Para-Athlete Experience” was designed to capture the collegiate athletic experience from high school recruitment to the current access to athletic resources. Athletes were additionally asked about their feelings within athletic spaces and how institutional staff became educated with Para-Sport. The final section “Assistance” asked participants to elaborate on their desired changes that would help athletic pursuits. Interview lengths ranged from 20 minutes to 43 minutes.

Analysis of Data

Transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 14 software. An open thematic coding approach was utilized to begin analysis of the interviews. This initially produced six themes during the first round of coding: athlete accolades, athlete difficulties, disability conceptualization, disability in athletics, athletics inclusion and athletics exclusion. At the conclusion of the first round, new themes emerged and became more defined which signaled the need for a second round of coding. This second round developed more elaborate codes with five major themes and two minor subthemes: disability mindset (subthemes of labels and perceptions), disability education, inclusion, exclusion and ableism.

Results

The data in this study, collected through interviews with elite Para-Athletes, have been organized using a thematic approach. Themes discussed in this section arose from inductive thematic analysis. Five themes emerged in the data: disability mindset, disability education, inclusion, exclusion, and ableism. Athletes discussed in their interviews the experiences and feelings associated with their disability's interaction with athletics forming a disability mindset. This captures how they themselves have conceptualized their disability based on the treatment of others, voiced opinions about disability in their environment and the physical capabilities of the athlete. The environment of athletes was directly shaped by the disability education available to individuals surrounding the athlete and was critical in developing systems. The access that athletes were granted to resources, quality of their interactions and biases visible to athletes developed into the final themes of inclusion, exclusion, and ableism.

Disability Mindset

In questions centered around recruitment and one’s own feelings within athletic spaces, athletes elaborated on their own “Disability Mindset”. This took two distinct forms, the labels used by athletes and the perceived norms associated with their disability or accolades.

Labels

Section III of the Interview Protocol, Para-Athlete Experience, produced rich data when asking athletes “In your opinion, have you felt more like an able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sports or as a Para-athlete who competes against able-bodied athletes?”. Table 3 displays each participant’s response to this question.

Table 3. Para-Athlete Identity

Athlete ID	Response
CPA1	Able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sport
CPA2	Able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sport
CPA3	Space Dependent Identity Able-bodied athlete when in collegiate setting Para-athlete when in Para setting
CPA4	Para-athlete who competes against able-bodied athletes
NPA5	Able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sport
NPA6	Able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sport until enrollment at institution then Para-athlete who competes against able-bodied athletes

As seen in Table 2, most interviewed athletes perceived themselves as able-bodied athletes who also do Para-sport. The essence for their reasoning behind this is best encapsulated by CPA3’s expansion of the question as he verbally thought about his answer to the question,

“I feel like a lot of times, my answer has changed. And that makes sense. I feel like it's tough to do, because when you're competing against able-bodies, it's obvious, you look a little different out there, and everyone's staring at you. So you kind of feel more comfortable in the Para meets. But I would say more recently, I feel like I'm a collegiate athlete competing in Para, but it might be more because of the time I spend with one team than the other. Which definitely plays a big impact because Para is only in the summer, whereas college is all year round. So I spend the time with the team. And I do like 20 or so meets in total for college, whereas Para is just one meet at a time.” (CPA3, 2024)

He suggests that this development of identity is shaped by the space that athletes predominantly find themselves in. This corresponds with the CPA4 and NPA6's reasoning for identifying as Para-athletes. In both cases, the athletes had felt unwelcomed in the able-bodied space for their own reasons. NPA6, another leg amputee, describes this shift in thinking as a result of the exclusion present at her institution when stating,

“I felt like an able-bodied athlete competing against Para athletes, but now it's kind of the other way around, especially with the way that [my institution has] kind of treated the whole situation definitely feels like an outsider.” (NPA6, 2024).

The exclusion faced by NPA6 will be discussed later in the “Exclusion” results section but the impact upon the athlete forced a fundamental shift in her own personal identification within the athletic world.

Perceptions

In the interviews with Para-athletes, it was common for athletes to discuss expected reactions to their disability or accolades. CPA4 and NPA6 each identified their accolades as reasonings for institutions to recruit them onto their collegiate rosters. In the case of CPA4, she

acknowledged that her marks and distances may not be what is expected for an able-bodied athlete but notes how accolades should circumvent this,

“I wanted to go Division I because I knew that I had the work ethic. And I had the stats not in terms of my times or my distances for jumps or anything like that, but I've been on Team USA like I'm on the bubble, I'm inches away from making the roster. So I was just like, listen I'm an elite athlete. I should be going where elite athletes go, I wanted to go Division I” (CPA4, 2024)

NPA6 echoed this sentiment and stated,

“I made the Paralympic team when I was a junior in high school. So I was like, Okay, this is huge for me. Like, that's when people get recruited, like people are going to be wanting to recruit me.” (NPA6, 2024)

NPA6 had spoken to multiple institutions with some delighted to have her in their program. A last minute decision and unexpected admission led NPA6 to choose an institution that she had not previously spoken to the coach and when emailing this staff, despite her accolades she was informed that she would not be added to the institution's collegiate team.

Other athletes struggled with the question of whether to disclose their disability or not during the recruitment process. CPA2 has vision impairment and when watching her races, it is possible to not recognize that the athlete is disabled. This does not remove the impacts of disability from an athlete but creates an opportunity for the athlete to make a decision. In her own words,

"I was always a little nervous about it, because I knew I wanted to run track in college. And, you know, I just never knew if I should tell them right up front about vision loss, or if I should, you know, wait and let them just see my times and let them just judge off of

that. But I went into it and I did tell them right off the bat about my vision loss.” (CPA2, 2024)

CPA1 had been decorated throughout his high school career and had impressive marks that were drawing interest from multiple Division I programs. The question of whether he would continue was not an if but rather where. Disability was not going to factor into this equation,

“That's when I just like, I was going to run track. I knew that was just something that I was going to do regardless of my disability, because I didn't think people kind of knew anyway, like, I kind of was smart enough to know like, I don't think people will know, I had a disability.” (CPA1, 2024)

CPA1 varied from the other elite Para-athletes interviewed as he did not disclose his disability. CPA1 elected to let his marks speak for themselves and have discussions about disability further down the road instead of introducing this during his recruitment period. CPA1 generally did not see his disability as extremely limiting, furthering the willingness to not disclose.

Disability Education

While not every program was educated about Para-athletes prior to the arrival of participants, some institutions previously had other Para-athletes on their roster or staff had previously worked with a Para-athlete. In the cases where participants were the first at their institution, the common trend was that education was largely led by the athletes themselves or came directly from the limited resources provided by the NCAA. For CPA3, his situation represented an ideal circumstance as his institution was home to another double amputee and his current coach was a teammate of that athlete while they were both in college. CPA2 began her time on the team as another Paralympian of a different disability and discipline was graduating. There were not clear transferable skills as in the case of CPA3 but the experience of coaching

another Para-athlete gave the team's staff valuable knowledge to help navigate the complex system of classification, selection procedures and other paperwork related tasks. CPA4's coach had previously worked with another elite Para-athlete in their coaching career but this came at a detriment to CPA4. The prior athlete was an entirely different classification and had a different disability leading to limited overlap between their training capabilities. The coach of CPA4 however did not recognize these differences which created a negative environment for the athlete.

Inclusion

The NCAA athletes were granted full access to the training venues, coaching staff, dining resources, academic assistance, and competition opportunities that were provided to able-bodied teammates. Athletes CPA2 and CPA3 noted their coach's willingness to go above and beyond what is provided to their able-bodied teammates to ensure success. CPA2 describes the process of competition venue walk-throughs. This is extremely important for the indoor 400m where athletes are required to break from their lanes around 200m into the race. This is indicated by visual markings on the track which were noted as sometimes difficult to see for CPA2. She expressed gratitude for her coach incorporating this routine into meet day. Additionally, the coach has changed their own behavior to better accommodate an athlete with a visual impairment by providing audio cues for starting training reps or providing audio callouts to warn the athlete of when a teammate is approaching for a relay exchange. CPA3 explains that his coach is frequently conducting her own research and doing extra analysis of his technique to provide more insight on new form improvements. The interactions are summarized in this statement,

“with different training stuff I go to for Team USA, or when I was just working with the coaches at Parapan, I would take all the information I learned and I would share it with

her and she would fully absorb it and then do even more research on just that. And she would make sure she watches each start to notice different kinds of stuff that I do than a normal athlete starting and try to incorporate as much as she can. The stuff that she knows from normal athletes block start to me, and then work with me to see how does that feel? Do I feel like I'm getting anything out of it? Does it feel optimal for me? So it's a lot of show, ask questions, and then learn at the same time with me. She does a lot of research, but we're learning together at the same time. What works best for me to make it better.” (CPA3, 2024)

This stands in direct contrast to the experience of CPA4 who was on her collegiate track team’s roster but did not experience her coach consistently providing more effort to enhance her athletic experience. Instead CPA4 was relegated to the non-conference athlete “B group” despite her success in Para-Athletics,

“Something that I would say was the most frustrating thing for me is, so the top athletes would obviously get, like the ones who are winning conference and things like that. Like, they're obviously getting more support, like they're getting massages, or, extra time in the athletic trainers office, or they have some different exercises ... So what would happen is, we had an A group, and a B group. A group was those elite athletes, and the B group was forgotten about, and we would be on the end, it was me and a few others. We'd be on the other side of the track and the coach wasn't even paying attention to us. And we would have to go across and ask what the workouts were, ask what are we doing every time. And the frustrating part about that for me was, okay I understand that I'm not a conference athlete, but I'm a Team USA athlete.” (CPA4, 2024)

CPA4's experience on the team was further harmed by the coach assigning punishments to teammates who were unable to perform better than CPA4 during workouts,

“It was just hard to feel like a respected athlete, when literally other people are getting punished for you beating them. That was kind of hurtful, because on one hand, you want to feel good about yourself, because you're like, oh, I'm beating this person. But also, I feel bad because they're in trouble because you were beating them.” (CPA4, 2024)

In this environment, the athlete was negatively impacted by the lack of support given by the team. CPA4's coach did not provide the athlete with instruction or input that would be useful in making improvements to the athlete's performance. Instead, the coach of CPA4 actively singled out the athlete which effectively only created hostility between CPA4 and her teammates.

NPA6 experienced little inclusion from her Power 5 institution. At first the institution did not provide access to any facility that was not open to the public. Following self-advocacy for the ability to use athletic spaces and property, NPA6 was granted access to a secondary weight lifting facility and the ability to access storage sheds at the public track to acquire university owned starting blocks for practice. Prior to this, NPA6 was required to use her own blocks for practices that required them and angrily recounted the difficulty in transporting them for practice,

“I only recently this summer got access to the blocks. Can you imagine that? Before this year, like my entire freshman year, I was two years out of the Paralympic Games on the National team. And they wouldn't even give me blocks. I had to bring blocks on my back on my bike to the track. My one legged ass was hauling my blocks like two miles to the fucking track.” (NPA6, 2024)

NPA6's story is better told through the lens of exclusion and will be further explained in the next section. NPA5 exists within a unique data standpoint. For the majority of his time in college, he

was not on the institution's collegiate roster. Five weeks prior to the interview, this changed due to new coaching staff advocating for his addition onto the team roster. The decision to classify his data under “non-colligate Para-athlete” reflects that this change is new. In his interview, changes were discussed and it must be noted that the rest of this section is from NPA5’s new circumstances as a rostered athlete. Under the new system, NPA5 has expressed how helpful having a team training environment has been. This new atmosphere has allowed him to hit faster training times that he believes would have not been possible alone. Furthermore, NPA5 now has access to a robust athlete dining plan that provides higher quality food and more flexibility with meal times. At this institution, access to the athletics facilities to the outside public is prohibited. Prior to being on the team, NPA5 would have to notify the Head Track and Field coach in advance of 24 hours if he required the track to be unlocked for use in his workouts. NPA5 stated that despite the required advance notice, at times the facility would still be closed due to the coach forgetting to open it for his use. This is no longer a problem with his inclusion on the institution’s roster.

Exclusion

Academic interference was a shared problem for CPA1 and CPA2. Following the Tokyo Paralympic Games, CPA1 was still attending his previous institution and returned to campus later than the rest of the student body due to the timing of the competitions. For the first weeks of the Fall semester of 2021, CPA was in a foreign country representing his nation at the most prestigious event within the sport. “I remember coming back from Tokyo, you know, one of the teachers he was like, he didn't really care about the Paralympics like that. He believed that I chose going to Tokyo over my academics.” (CPA1, 2024). The athlete explains that this lack of assistance from the institution was a primary reason for his transfer to his current institution. For

CPA2, her vision impairment creates difficulties in reading the chalkboards in the room. She explains that assistive technology is present within the classroom but select faculty will refuse to use it and only write on the chalkboards out of old habit. This has created an unnecessary barrier to her academics and made the learning environment far more difficult.

CPA2 faced issues when attempting to compete for her collegiate team's relays. While not forbidding her from being in other positions than first, her coach is wary of putting her later in the order. This stems from the worries that CPA2 would have trouble seeing the exchange,

“Sometimes I do feel like it hinders his decision making when he comes to the 4x400, because I know he's like, well I can't put her second or third leg because he thinks that it's harder for me to receive it and give the baton, which it's not, but that's a whole nother issue we've kind of been trying to deal with. So that sometimes like the inclusion with the athletic part, even in my college, I feel like I'm still battling that five years later, which is a little hard and challenging.” (CPA2, 2024)

The athlete did not state any instances that this thinking directly led to her losing a spot on the relay team in favor of an able-bodied athlete but voiced concern and explained the annoyance created from this conversation.

Expanding on the previously mentioned relegation of CPA4 to her team's “B group”, this athlete faced trouble entering collegiate competitions and being properly recognized by her athletic department. For CPA4, her marks and times are highly competitive in her classification with bountiful success being seen in her Para-career. At the Division I track and field level, this success borders on minimum entry standards for competition. A primary problem faced by CPA4 was gaining opportunities to compete throughout the seasons. She explains that the home meets

hosted by her institution were the only chances to race as the minimum requirements were waived. On one occasion, the meet officials chose to ignore policy and record all of the athlete's marks despite minimums, described by CPA4,

“I was doing the long jump. And they weren't measuring anything below a certain number. And they waived that for me, because I was right on the bubble, I had to be hitting close to it. But they would measure it for me anyway. Because they did say that I was a Para athlete. So they would like that to be measured. But I would say that was the only time in a meet environment where there was advocacy for that.” (CPA4, 2024)

During the athletic success of CPA4, her school failed to include her accomplishments at the 2023 Parapan American Games. This stunned professors and staff who were expecting to read about it in the weekly newsletter that detailed this institution's happenings within athletics. The exclusion struck the professors and the athlete as odd since this information was supposed to make an appearance. Institutional devaluing of Para-sport will be further touched upon in the next section.

NPA5 and NPA6 faced locked doors and unfriendly staff in their athletic pursuits. Institutional resources given to rostered varsity athletes were not shared to the elite Para-athletes. For NPA5, he was unable to access the track entirely as it was closed to the public. This forced him to complete track workouts on a track that was in terribly poor condition. “There's a local high school track nearby, but there's like concrete patches kind of coming through the rubber because it's just been so long since it's been resurfaced. So it's not the best facility.” (NPA5, 2024). The institution eventually allowed for NPA5 to use their track but advance notice to unlock the facility was required but the athlete kindly voiced his annoyance with this system as the head coach, “Sometimes he would remember sometimes he wouldn't. So it wasn't reliable is

the best way to put it.” (NPA5, 2024). NPA6’s experience stood in pure violation of the institutions’ Power 5 conference legislation mandating that all members grant resources to high-level Para-athletes despite their roster status and assist them in continuing athletic excellence. NPA6 was required to relentlessly advocate for herself to access subpar weight training facilities at unideal times slots or as previously mentioned in “Inclusion” have access to basic competition equipment such as starting blocks for practice. This caused NPA6 to feel intense negativity,

“I hate it so much. I actually, it's sad though, because, I'll just start saying, I feel so out of place and judged by pretty much everyone in the [institution] athletics scene, to the point where I would not wear any USA stuff. Like when I was training because I didn't want them to think that I thought I was better than them or like anything, I just didn't want to be associated. Or, like, ever talked to them. And like when the track coaches come out while I'm there, I don't want to talk to them. They make me feel so uncomfortable.”

(NPA6, 2024)

It is alarming to hear that an athlete is so dissatisfied within an environment that speaking to others who occupy the space is avoided or an athlete chooses to adjust the training gear worn to avoid clothes that were earned and typically hold prestige.

Ableism

Para-athletes spoke of dismissal of their experiences in athletics as a direct result of ableism. A minor example of this can be seen with CPA2’s announcement onto the track prior to the beginning of her collegiate race. It is not uncommon for sporting announcers to provide a short list of accolades when announcing the name of an athlete and their current lane assignment

for the race. The announcers focus on the most recent or highest crowning achievement of the athlete's career.

“Because sometimes, I try to almost separate the Paralympics from my college, because there have been times where I'm at meets, and, you know, the announcer I'll be standing in front of the blocks, and he starts announcing my Para accolades. And I appreciate that I, you know, I want people to know that I do have college accomplishments as well. And I feel like, not that it takes anything away. But I feel like, personally, people in the crowd are almost being like, she's in the Paralympics? What's wrong with her? Because you can't see physically, what's wrong with me, and so I feel like, even though maybe people don't think that, my own perception is they're trying to figure out what's wrong with me” (CPA2, 2024)

CPA2 continued to explain that she wanted to be respected as any other athlete would be.

Explaining that there she is discontent with being “CPA2 with vision loss” and just wants to be seen as “CPA2 the athlete”.

Athletes spoke about the tendency for able-bodied athletes to be placed higher than themselves even in circumstances where each has equal accolades. CPA1 described this phenomenon happening at his school and on his team where there are multiple Olympians. CPA1 perceived that these athletes were more likely to be given media attention or invited to celebrations by the institution following their World Championships in 2023. NPA6 witnessed that other Olympic athletes did not require the levels of advocacy she needed to access facilities noting,

“I had been emailing them since I got in, in like, December before I came. And she just asked like two weeks into being on campus and was given even more than I was given

which is like athlete dining and gym stuff and like PT and training. And even more than that, it's that the accommodations were very clear to her when she should and should not go.” (NPA6, 2024)

Furthermore, NPA6 explains that the institution continues to allow alumni who are Olympic athletes more access to facilities than she currently receives as an active student. When speaking to the previously mentioned Olympic athlete who more rapidly received inclusion (who she considers a friend), the topic of their status on campus in the athletic community was discussed.

“I went training at the athlete gym like three times with my Olympian friend. I was telling her about how I felt so uncomfortable. And she, like, could not understand why I would feel out of place because Olympians are seen as better than college athletes.” (NPA6, 2024).

While ultimately summarizing the experience at her institution as,

“I know that if I were an able bodied person with the exact same pedigree and like resume, they would bend over backwards, to have me in their spaces and promote me and like, do more than just allow me in places but absolutely encourage me to go and that has not been my experience at all.” (NPA6, 2024)

The tendency for Para-sport to fall lower on a hierarchical ranking compared to able-bodied sport is seen again with CPA4. In the interview the athlete gestured and recounted an interaction with her coach that had occurred on a few instances. CPA4 states that her coach had gestured that the Paralympics were below the Olympics. And upon clarification of this gesture, CPA4 extended the scenario and mentioned that the coach placed the Paralympics competitively below collegiate conference meets. In context to the conversation, the athlete was speaking about her struggle to explain to the coach the limitations that cerebral palsy placed upon her physical capabilities. This

itself was a difficult task as the coach was unwilling to accept the words of an individual who has lived with this condition since birth and instead continued to hold previous concepts of disability learned from working with an upper limb athlete in years prior. A memory of one of these interactions occurred following a flare up of the athlete's cerebral palsy,

“I still have to train and I'm still able to train like, it's just not to the same capacity. And I tried to explain this to my coach, I was like, it kind of feels like pins and needles a little bit, because it's just kind of short circuiting. But I'm still able to do stuff, they're [the coach] like go home. This is something I literally have no control over, but I will go home, and then therefore not be able to train at all, which is kind of worse. Because for cerebral palsy when you have a flare up, the worst thing you can do is nothing. And it was just like, go home, I have 20 other athletes to deal with. I can't deal with this go home.” (CPA4, 2024)

The coach, guided by past preconceptions of disability and the minimization of Para-sport, elected to send away the athlete rather than having a conversation to better understand the circumstances. A moment of education for the coach was missed and the athlete suffered improper training due to this ableism.

Discussion

As Para-sport grows and more disabled athletes pursue post-secondary education, the demand on the NCAA to ensure proper inclusion across its member institutions is increasingly vital. The blossoming landscape of the NCAA today is littered with examples of inconsistencies and poor execution for the inclusion of ambulatory athletes. From the perspective of Para-athletes, disability education is lacking at the collegiate level with this burden falling upon them to inform administrators, faculty, and coaching staff about working with Para-athletes. It

appears that this root cause is responsible for the misconceptions that manifest in inadequate inclusion, examples of exclusion and rampant ableism.

CPA4 exemplifies the importance of quality inclusion. Membership on an NCAA team does not equate to a desirable or even equitable training environment. The ability for coaches and athletics staff to properly accommodate an athlete's disability as seen with CPA3 is required for true development of an athlete. The key difference between the two athletes within the same group was their coaching. CPA4's coach refused to continue learning or take into consideration the impact of cerebral palsy on one's training. Furthermore, it was commonplace for this coach to punish able-bodied teammates if they were unable to match the performance of their disabled teammate. It was assumed and proclaimed that able-bodied athletes were expected to beat CPA4 in workouts. This was not hidden from the athlete, essentially stigmatizing her involvement within the team's workouts. CPA3's experience was marked instead by an eagerness to develop a more complete model of how double below knee amputations impacted the athlete. The athlete was treated as any other athlete on the team would be and the appropriate accommodations were made.

A shared problem for collegiate elite Para-athletes and non-collegiate Para-athletes is the lack of equitable treatment between able-bodied and Para-athletes in post-secondary athletics. This is seen clearly through the lens of CPA1 and NPA6, where both athletes attend institutions with a strong presence of Olympic caliber athletes. In both of their transcripts, it is evident that institutions more rapidly attend to or promote their able-bodied athletes for media coverage and access to resources. CPA1 explained that Olympic athletes were preferred for media coverage by the institution and selected for in-person celebrations more frequently. Visibility of Para-athletes aids in expansion of the sport and helps spread the Paralympic Movement throughout our

culture. NPA6 directly references institutional bias towards Olympic athletes by pointing out how alumni or other currently enrolled athletes were more likely to be welcomed by the athletics department.

The recent inclusion of NPA5 to his institution's able-bodied team demonstrates the systematic problem with Para-inclusion at the post-secondary level. The discretion to provide resources to athletes is entirely in the hands of an institution and is not adequately enforced by any governing body. NPA5 was added onto the team despite nothing new changing with his athletic performance or disability status. The simple change that was required was a new coaching staff that more greatly advocated for him to become a rostered member of the team. The transition of NPA5 onto the collegiate team exposed a blind spot in the institution's policies regarding Para-athletes as previous justifications for exclusion were shown to be invalid. The justification for NPA6's exclusion is rooted in performance as NPA6's times are slightly slower than a potential able-bodied prospect but her accolades hold immense weight. The lack of support from the institution has been credited by NPA6 as a reasoning behind her undesirable performance of late. The stress from juggling being a full-time student with high academic marks and being a full-time elite Para-athlete with no support has strained NPA6. The institution's willingness to make exceptions for Olympic athletes proves the possibility for NPA6's further access to institutional resources given that it becomes a priority of the athletic department.

Limitations

Elite Para-Athletes are uncommon in comparison to their able-bodied counterparts, making this topic niche. As this study was exploratory in nature, generalizations of the conclusion to other Para-sports that currently exist within the NCAA or adaptive sports programs should be made with caution.

Conclusions and Direction for Future Inquiry

Future research on this topic should be expanded to include adaptive team members and wheelchair athletes. While the results and conclusions of this study were able to capture Para-inclusion for ambulatory athletes who can more easily be slotted onto existing collegiate teams, the opportunities and needs for wheelchair racers is vastly different. The themes of inclusion, exclusion, and ableism likely are experienced differently by non-ambulatory or severely disabled athletes. Programs at the University of Arizona and the University of Illinois have been at the forefront of adaptive sports and each host their own wheelchair racing teams. San Diego State University and the University of Michigan both have developed robust adaptive track teams. Future investigations could incorporate interviews with coaching staff or athletics department faculty to identify and highlight the possible barriers for Para-athletes attempting to compete collegiately.

CPA3's identification of a Space Dependent Identity within his Disability Mindset raises further questions about how an athlete's labels and perceptions will change overtime. Questioning within this study did not capture the full scope of all the participating athletes' careers with some individuals choosing to divulge more than others. Targeting questions on this topic will serve to better uncover the evolving nature of Disability Mindset rather than seeing a static snapshot of this concept. Extending questioning to capture athlete's attitudes and perceptions about the "supercrip" narrative could be helpful in understanding the influence of media representations on one's Disability Mindset.

Disability Education was discussed by athletes but interviews suggested that there was a possibility that athletes were unaware of how staff or faculty were being educated. Speaking directly to coaches or athletics staff provides a new perspective on the resources available.

Furthermore, questioning the sources of information such as representatives from the International Paralympic Committee or NCAA's DEI Office could potentially be ripe for analysis of how information disseminated from the highest levels to staff and what information is lost in that transaction.

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Appendix A. Para-Athletics Classifications

Classification	IPC Definition	Criteria
T11-T13	Vision Impairment	T11 - Near total visual impairment, athletes require blacked-out glasses and guides T12 - Moderate visual impairment, choice to compete with or without guide T13 - Least visual impairment, competes independently
T20	Intellectual impairment	
T33-34*	Co-ordination impairments (hypertonia, ataxia and athetosis)	T33 - high movement impairment of lower limbs, moderate movement impairment of trunk and upper limbs T34 - high movement impairment of lower limbs, low movement impairment of trunk and upper limbs
T35-T38	Co-ordination impairments (hypertonia, ataxia and athetosis)	T35 - moderate impairment to lower limbs resulting in a fast, short stride T36 - low to moderate impairment of all four limbs T37 - moderate impairment to upper and lower limbs of one side T38 - low impairment to one half of the body
T42-44	Lower limb competing without prosthesis affected by limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired passive range of movement	T42 - moderate impairment to one or both lower limbs resulting in drive originating from the hips or core T43 - moderate impairment to both lower limbs T44 - low or moderate impairment to one limb

T45-47	Upper limb/s affected by limb deficiency, impaired muscle power or impaired passive range of movement	T45 - high impairment of both upper limbs T46 - moderate to high impairment of one arm above the elbow T47 - low to moderate impairment of one arm below the elbow
T51-54*	Limb deficiency, leg length difference, impaired muscle power or impaired passive range of movement	T51 - moderate impairment to shoulders, high impairment to remainder of the body T52 - low impairment to shoulders and arms, high impairment to remainder of the body T53 - high impairment to legs and trunk T54 - full function of the body with absence or moderate impairment of the legs
T61-64	Lower limb/s competing with prosthesis affected by limb deficiency and leg length difference	T61 - double above knee impairment T62 - double below knee impairment T63 - single above knee impairment T64 - single below knee impairment

* Denotes Classifications competing using wheelchair

Appendix B. Para-Athlete Interview Protocol

I. Experience and Accolades

- Describe your athletic career from childhood to current day
 - How long have you competed in any Para-sport?
 - In your current sport?
 - What National Teams / International competitions have you been involved in?

II. Post-Secondary Academics

- What are your current academic pursuits?
 - What is your current class year / expected graduation date?
 - What is your intended major(s) and minor(s)?
 - What are your future plans post-graduation?
- How has the dynamic between academic pursuits and athletic involvement worked for you?

III. Para-Athlete Experience

- What was your recruiting experience like?
 - As a freshman, were you recruited by your current or previous institution?
 - In the recruiting process, was your disability discussed?
 - In a negative manner that excluded you?
 - In a positive manner that included you?
- What access do you have to athletic resources?
 - Sport specific venues for training purposes (ie, track, pool, courts)?
 - Training equipment (ie, weight rooms, speed sleds, balls)?

- Coaching staff provided by the institution (or is your coach provided by the USOPC)?
- Competitions (funded vs non-funded)?
- How do you conceptualize your involvement in athletics?
 - In your opinion, have you felt more like an able-bodied athlete who also does Para-sports or as a Para-athlete who competes against able-bodied athletes
- What feelings are evoked when present in athletic spaces?
- How has your institution recognized your athletic accomplishments?
 - via press releases, on-campus celebrations (ie, posters or events) or congratulations from upper-level staff?
- Have institution staff had prior experience working with Para-athletes at the time of your arrival on campus?
 - If so, how were they previously educated
 - If not, what resources were available to help understand Para-sport

IV. Assistance

- Where would you like your institution to provide more resources that would best aid your athletic pursuits?