

# Group Member or Outsider: Perceptions of Undergraduates with Disabilities on Leisure Time Physical Activity

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## Abstract

College provides students with many opportunities to achieve academic success and enrich other aspects of their lives. Participating in campus activities can reduce stress, create social connections, promote healthy active living, and broaden civic engagement (Lindsey & Sessoms, 2006; Watson, Ayers, Zizzi, & Naoi, 2006). Studies noting these benefits appear to include only students without disabilities, particularly investigations that addressed physical recreation options. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their access to and engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus. Using a qualitative method, 16 full-time undergraduate students were interviewed. Findings included themes of right fit, quality of life, and connectedness. Recommendations focusing on the individual and the educational environments in which they live are provided.

*Keywords: Physical activity, leisure, inclusion, people with disabilities, theory of involvement*

The college years typically are an important formative time for young adults who seek postsecondary education. It is not only a time for career preparation but a life phase when lifelong behavior and choice patterns develop. In particular, these years tend to be a time when young adults engage in a high degree of leisure time physical activity.

Most college campuses are designed to promote activities such as walking, cycling, and hiking to encourage an optimal level of physical activity. Additionally, it is more common than not for campuses to have recreation and wellness centers where students can engage in a wide range of fitness, sport, and physically active recreation. Along with these centers, there are often many options for engagement in physical activity such as outdoor recreation trips (e.g., hiking, kayaking, skiing), intermural sport clubs, and a variety of fitness and wellness classes (e.g., Zumba, yoga). Together, these opportunities offer many options for college students to be physically active. There is lim-

ited research, however, on the extent and manner of how students with disabilities utilize campus-based recreational and fitness activities. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of college students with mobility and sensory impairments on their access to and engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus. Within this frame, perceived barriers and facilitators to recreational options were examined.

## Review of Literature

College experiences not only prepare students for careers, but prepare them to be active and engaged community members upon graduation (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011). While attending college, students can learn valuable skills and gain various life experiences such as leadership skills, living and working with people from different backgrounds, preparation for civic engagement, and building a pattern of healthy active living. These skills and experiences gained in the late adolescent and young adult years

are important because they set the stage for life-long behavior patterns (Elkins et al., 2011). For the typically developing student, research in higher education has extensively studied variables that contribute to student retention and graduation. One important predictor is social involvement in student life beyond the classroom. Greater involvement in student life (e.g., political, civic, residential, social) leads to greater academic success (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Henchy, 2011).

Student involvement can and should include leisure engagement, activities that are chosen by an individual to enhance life satisfaction and quality of life. Leisure activities involve behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in a pursuit to achieve self-fulfillment and quality of life (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). In support of previous findings, studies examining leisure involvement have reported that connection to others and spending time with people is a more important predictor of leisure engagement than the activity itself (Samdahl & Jacobovich, 1997). These are important findings for academic institutions to consider when addressing student success in and beyond the classroom, especially for students with disabilities.

College-based options for physical activity are enhanced by the ease and proximity students have to facilities and services. Often student recreation, fitness, and wellness facilities are centrally located in an area that is easily accessible for the students. They typically offer a wide variety of options to meet the diverse needs and interests of the student body. According to Lindsey and Sessoms (2006), student recreation and fitness options can include the typical cardiovascular, strength, and conditioning options as well as non-traditional options such as indoor rock climbing walls, vortex pools, fitness classes, outdoor recreation, and intramural team sports. With such a large variety of options, it could be assumed that participation in these activities would be significant. According to Watson, Ayers, Zizzi, and Naoi (2006), about 78-88% of full-time and part-time college students use these resources to engage in physical activity. Of these participants, most engage in the cardiovascular, strength, and conditioning options including classes as well as fitness equipment (e.g., weight lifting, stationary bikes, treadmills). While these data indicate a large percentage of usage of facilities and services, it does not delineate the number of college students with disabilities who engage in university-based physical activity.

According to theory of involvement, participation in extracurricular activities contributes to academic success and success beyond college (Astin, 1999). Specifically, this theory assumes that as extracurricular involvement increases, students' learning and sense of belonging increases. However, this theory assumes that involvement is predicated on one's belief that his or her needs will be met. Elkins et al. (2011) found that students who participated in campus recreation and sports perceived a greater sense of campus community than those who did not, thus developing a sense of connectedness to place and others. Student participation in extracurricular activities also leads to friendships that continue beyond the social activity and college years (Tinto, 1993).

These findings may be true for college students with disabilities; however, few studies examining these variables have been conducted. Blinde and Taub (1999) found that college males with disabilities who participated in extracurricular sports or fitness activities felt empowered. This empowerment enhanced their perceptions as a social actor particularly relative to experiencing a sense of accomplishment and social inclusion. Another study examining engagement in extracurricular activities and use of a campus-based student recreation center on student success found that it was beneficial for student recruitment and retention, enjoyment in participation, and improved quality of life (Henchy, 2011). Henchy also found that students experienced a variety of social benefits from using a campus-based student recreation center such as feeling at home, an increased sense of belonging, and opportunities to develop friendships. While Henchy discusses some demographics of the study's subjects, there is no indication that any of the respondents were students with disabilities.

In another investigation, Miller (2011) examined the impact of social belonging and retention on the use of student recreation facilities. He found that student recreation centers provided strong emotional ties to the university and a reason to persist. Miller also reported that students felt that a student recreation center was essential for creating social bonding. Respondents felt that involvement in the recreation center created a sense of belonging to the university, a sense of community, and an increased commitment and trust in their peers. While Miller had a strong rate of return (76%) of the surveys and a fairly equal male/female respondent ratio, there was no indication whether any of the

respondents had a disability. In an examination of characteristics of users and non-users of campus recreation centers, Miller, Noland, Rayens, and Staten (2008) used a random sample of undergraduate students and asked them to self-identify personal characteristics. These characteristics included typical demographics (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity) as well as living situation, marital status, grade point average, membership in sorority or fraternity, participation in intercollegiate athletics, but did not include disability.

The lack of studies examining the role of extracurricular activities and use of student recreation facilities on academic success of students with disabilities is problematic on several levels. Leisure requires behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement for an individual to understand the role of leisure in his/her life. For students with disabilities, recreation contexts are forums from which many skills can be learned and practiced. Indeed, Devine and O'Brien (2007) found that with viable opportunities, adolescents with disabilities can make and sustain social relationships with their typically developing peers. Second, college students often rely on recreation activities as a means for reducing stress. Without involvement in such activities, students with disabilities could experience a high degree of stress with limited options for decreasing or buffering it (Devine & Koch, 2003). Devine and Koch asserted that engagement in recreation activities can be a training ground for individuals with disabilities for future careers and provide access to informal job networks. A lack of inclusion of students with disabilities in college life beyond the classroom decreases the potential for social acceptance by their typically developing peers. Given the increased diversity on college campuses, in the workforce, and community life, social acceptance is an important component of inclusion of people with disabilities (Devine & Lashua, 2002). Thus, engagement in leisure time activities by college students with disabilities has the potential to produce substantially better prepared individuals for their college experiences as well as life after college.

Lastly, inclusion of students with disabilities on college campuses can be viewed from a social justice perspective in providing valuable opportunities for these students (Tollefsen, 2010). Inclusion in leisure time physical activity can have social, physical, and psychological benefits while in college and throughout life. Given the recent dialogue about the importance of engagement in physical activity for lifelong health,

offering a variety of options for physical activity on college campuses is not only an important step for promoting healthy active living for the typical college student, but for developing a lifelong commitment to being physically active.

In general, people with disabilities are less likely to engage in regular physical activity than those without disabilities, yet they have the same needs to promote their health, prevent disease, and reduce secondary conditions to their disability. Several reasons for inactivity have been identified, including a lack of knowledge of the importance of physical activity, limited transportation to and from these sites, inaccessible facilities and equipment, and attitudinal barriers on the part of those without disabilities (Rimmer & Braddock, 2002; Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004). Do college students with disabilities encounter these same reasons for inactivity? Given the prevalence of campus-based recreation and fitness facilities as well as the lifelong preparation these facilities can offer to students, this study sought to explore and understand the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their access to and engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus. The research questions that guided this study were: What are the *perceptions* of college students with disabilities relative to accessing and engaging in leisure time physical activities on their campus? What are meaningful and valued aspects of participation in physically active leisure on their campus? Secondary aspects explored in the first research question centered on perceptions of *barriers* and *facilitators* encountered when accessing and engaging in leisure time physical activities on their campus.

To best understand the perspectives of college students with disabilities, a qualitative investigation was undertaken, as recommended by Miller (2011), to develop a body of knowledge regarding the benefits of student recreation centers for a university. Criteria for participation in this study included: (a) must be enrolled full-time or  $\frac{3}{4}$  time in a four-year institution, (b) the student's college campus must have a student recreation/wellness facility, and (c) the student had to have a mobility or visual impairment. Only students with mobility and visual impairments were sought for participation in this study because individuals with these disabilities have historically encountered a greater breadth of barriers to engagement in physical activities than individuals with intellectual, hearing, or mental health disabilities (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson,

Autry, & Hanson, 2001; Wilhite & Shank, 2009). Engagement in leisure tends to involve a broader range of accommodations (e.g., programmatic, physical, visual, tactile, auditory) for individuals with visual and mobility impairments than are needed to accommodate people with intellectual, hearing, or mental health disabilities (Blinde & Taub, 1999; Lundberg, Taniguchi, McCormic, & Tibbs, 2011). For instance, Rimmer et al. (2004) reported that individuals who used mobility devices (e.g., wheelchairs) and individuals with visual impairments needed programmatic, environmental, and architectural accommodations, whereas individuals with intellectual, hearing, and mental health disabilities tended not to need all three types of accommodations. One of the primary intents of this study was to understand the perceptions of college students with disabilities about accessing and engaging in leisure time physical activities. The purpose of the research questions was to understand a breadth of barriers such as those already identified. Additionally, given the accommodations needed and the growing body of physical activity and disability literature, one assumption upon which this study was based is that students with mobility and visual impairments would tend to engage in leisure time physical activity less than those with intellectual, hearing, and mental health impairments. Thus, given these factors, this inquiry sought only students with mobility and visual disabilities for examination.

Recruitment was conducted through the university's student accessibility services using an electronic message. Students interested in participating were instructed to contact the researcher directly. After initial contact, a screening was conducted to determine if the student met the criteria of the study. A snowball method was also used to gain additional research participants. Research participants were 16 undergraduate college students from ages 18-24 attending five different universities near the Great Lakes in a Midwestern state. See Table 1 for demographic information about the participants. Participants who agreed had a variety of ethnic backgrounds and disabilities. Most had lived with their disability from birth or for an extended period of time, suggesting participants were most likely well-adjusted to their disability. Nick was the exception to this sample as he sustained double leg amputations as a result of engagement in military interventions. At the time of his involvement in this study, Nick had been living with his amputations for three years. All participants had been in college for at least one year. Eleven

lived in residence halls on their respective campuses and five lived in homes or apartments within one mile of campus. Exactly 50% of the research participants were currently engaging in some form of leisure time physical activity and 50% were only occasionally (e.g., once/month) engaged. Engagement in leisure time physical activity was operationalized as participation in an activity that required physical activity at least three days weekly for a minimum of 30 minutes.

In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with participants. A written interview guide was developed based on (a) a literature review of physical activity and people with disabilities and participation in college campus recreation centers, (b) ADA guidelines for accessibility, and (c) anecdotal information from students with impairments about access to physically active recreation options. From this, 12 guiding questions were developed for interviews with research participants (see Table 2). Interviews were conducted on an individual basis lasting from 45-70 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded thematically using NVivo software to organize the data.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data was conducted using qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and Classical Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978) methods. The qualitative analysis gave the researcher a starting point to analyze data by identifying patterns, behaviors, and perceptions of the research participants. Grounded Theory provided the framework for constant comparison of themes and patterns. The themes and patterns were compared to participant perceptions to then frame results in a theoretical model grounded in the data.

Data were analyzed in several layers by the researcher and two research assistants as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, transcripts were read and coded line-by-line, examining the data for themes. Next, initial coding was examined to identify common and consistent themes across research participants. According to Glaser (1978), the last layer of analysis identified relationships and interactions between themes to more fully understand the data and to develop categories grounded in the data.

Trustworthiness, as it relates to reliability and validity of the data, is always an issue worthy of addressing in qualitative inquiries. As guided questions were developed and data gathered, the researcher and assistants acknowledged and reflected on their bias.

Table 1

*Information on Study Participants*


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<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Disability</u>
Clare	18	F	Caucasian	Paraplegia, T-8
Kate	19	F	African American	Cerebral Palsy
Jane	18	F	Caucasian	Spinal Muscular Atrophy
Bryan	21	M	Caucasian	Macular Degeneration
Abe	22	M	African American	Blindness (birth)
Ellen	19	F	Asian American	Cerebral Palsy
Lydia	24	F	Caucasian	Multiple Sclerosis
Jay	22	M	African American	Paraplegia, T-10
Craig	24	M	Caucasian	Spina Bifida
Kyle	23	M	Asian American	Paraplegia, T-6
Maryn	20	F	Asian American	Cerebral Palsy
Ashley	18	F	Caucasian	Blindness (birth)
Kevin	19	M	Caucasian	Spina Bifida
Susan	20	F	African American	Cerebral Palsy
Denise	19	F	Caucasian	Paraplegia, T-6
Nick	23	M	Caucasian	Double AK Amputation

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Table 2

*Sample Interview Questions*

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1. What do you like to do in your free time?
  2. What type of physical activity do you participate in on campus?
  3. What are your reasons for doing (not doing) these activities?
  4. What are things or features that really help or make it possible for you to do these activities? What gets in the way or what are the barriers to doing these activities?
  5. What do you gain or get out of these activities? What about them is valuable to you?

During data analysis, the researcher and assistants discussed accuracy of themes, verifying emerging themes with data until consensus was achieved. Credibility of findings using member checks was accomplished with research participants via telephone calls and electronic mail correspondence. Feedback and additional comments from research participants was used as additional data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A researcher not associated with this study was used to examine and confirm the data analysis process, codes, and categories produced through data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The resulting analysis was agreed upon with this triangulation of analysis via the researcher's interpretation, member checks from the research participants, and outside researcher.

## Results

The primary purpose for this study was to investigate perceptions, meaning, and value of engagement in on-campus leisure time physical activities for college students with mobility and visual impairments. The intent of investigating these constructs is to better understand barriers and facilitators experienced by these students. The first question asked the research participants to discuss their perceptions of access and engagement in campus based leisure time physical activity. The theme that emerged centered on the experience being the *right fit* for the person given his or her needs, interests, and sense of perceived acceptance by those without disabilities.

**Right fit.** A common thread through all 16 research participants was the notion of the physically active leisure activity being in alignment with their needs, interests, desires, and resources. This theme had several dimensions but, overall, centered on the tasks, skills, resources, and effort needed to engage in an activity. This theme also emerged as a factor that facilitated engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus. Specifically, if the experience was a right fit, participants were more likely to engage in it on a regular basis. If it was not the right fit, participants perceived it as a barrier to engage in leisure time physical activities on their campus.

Maryn, a 20 year-old woman with cerebral palsy (C.P.) stated, "it [the activity] works if it is the right fit on lots of levels. Like, it has to be something I'm interested in first of all. It also must be accessible and feasible." She felt an activity was feasible if the

amount of effort she had to put forth matched her level of energy and stamina. Maryn indicated that she did not participate in activities regularly mostly due to the effort the logistics took to get to the student recreation center, stating "even once I get there, it takes a lot of effort to go from the bus stop to the rec[recreation center] and then get around in the building because it's so big." Lydia, a 24 year-old woman with multiple sclerosis (m.s.) expressed a perception of engagement in physical activity being "daunting." Specifically, she felt that, most times, she was overwhelmed with what it took for her to participate in a physical activity on her campus. According to Lydia:

I like to dance and used to do a lot of it before my m.s. So, I signed up for a Zumba class and just felt it took too much to do it, from getting to the building, to the locker room, to the studio; I was worn out before the class even started.

She and others also discussed how the pace of fitness classes was a barrier in that they had difficulty keeping up with the instructor. Abe, a student with a visual impairment, indicated that the layout or design of a facility was important to being a right fit for him in that a facility that has taken the use of people with visual impairments into account allowed him to use his auditory cueing skills. Ellen, a 19-year-old woman with c.p., conveyed frustration with not being able to keep up with the instructor in a fitness dance class, "I felt more like a spectator than a participant."

Kevin, a 19-year-old man with spina bifida (s.b.) who participates regularly in physically active leisure, discussed the right fit in terms of being able to do the activity and meet his personal needs. He said, "I love to take risks and kinda 'get out there,' but I gotta be able to, you know, take care of myself." He went on to describe how he likes to try high risk adventure activities, but the activity must be feasible relative to the length of time it takes to do the activity, the availability of adaptive equipment, and proximity to accessible restroom facilities so he can attend to his personal needs regularly. Kevin did state that he likes to participate in indoor rock climbing using climbing walls because it is challenging and he can do it in a length of time that meets his personal needs. Clare, an 18-year-old woman with T-8 paraplegia, perceived engagement in physically active leisure centered on meeting her needs and interests. She described herself as being a person

who liked to “escape to my recreation so I swim and do yoga.” She sought those activities because they fit what she was able to accomplish and wanted to gain from the experience; specifically, she engaged in them to gain the solace she needed.

Another dimension of the *right fit* theme was the idea of fitting in. Jane, Jay, and Clare, all of whom use wheelchairs to ambulate, discussed the experience as being the right fit if they perceived that there was a welcoming atmosphere. Jane, an 18-year-old woman with spinal muscular atrophy, did not participate in physically active leisure on a regular basis because “it makes me feel like I stick out like a sore thumb.” She stated that it made her feel like she was on display and was always being watched. Jane acknowledged that she knows she should be physically active for health reasons, but did not do so because she felt like it drew negative attention. This dimension was also echoed by Jay, a 22-year-old man with T-10 paraplegia, but from a different perspective. He regularly engaged in physically active leisure because:

It makes me feel like a regular guy. Ya know, like any other 22-year-old in there lifting [weights], playing basketball. I need to do this to stay healthy, ya know, and don't mind if people are watchin' [me] cause it makes me want to lift more or make that long shot. Like I'm giving them a show and showing 'em what I can do, just like any other guy.

Jay claimed that feeling like he fit in when engaging in leisure time physical activities facilitated his regular participation. Clare expressed that she needed few adaptations to do her chosen activities (swimming, yoga) and felt most comfortable when staff or teachers took the accommodations she needed in stride. She described engagement in her yoga class as being flexible to adaptations she needed:

No one seems to care that I hop in and out of my chair to do it. It's like when they stand and do stuff, I sit and when they get on the floor I do, too. I don't know if it would be like that if I was in another type of class, maybe it would. But, in my yoga class, no one seems to care and the teacher and I adapt as we go along.

The approach or attitude teachers and staff at campus recreation and fitness facilities take to the modifications

or adaptations she needs were factors Clare considered important to her regular engagement.

For some, the *right fit* had a clear dimension that related to specific accessibility needs. These needs varied according to the participant's disability, but most indicated that if their individual accommodations needs could be met, the activity was a right fit. As students with visual impairments, Abe, Ashley, and Bryan discussed needing someone to orient them to the building, surroundings, and equipment. Ashley said that she loved hiking and biking, but did not like being in large buildings like the student recreation center on her campus. According to Ashley:

I love being outdoors and hiking and biking, tandem [bicycle] of course, are great for me. But when I'm biking, my front person better describe where we are, where we're going, what's around us, and all that stuff. I don't like being surprised by a big bump or sharp turn.

She described feeling “lost” and “not really engaged” in the activity if her co-cyclist did not describe the surroundings, people in the area, or other aspects of the environment. Neither Abe nor Bryan participate regularly in leisure time physical activities because they felt the large recreation/fitness facilities on their campuses were daunting. Bryan stated that he needed a thorough orientation to large areas and buildings and found it difficult to use sound cues to navigate in the recreation center on his campus. Abe had a similar perception and felt his campus recreation center was not a place where he felt welcomed or included for several reasons, one being that it was not designed for people with visual impairments. According to Abe, “Sounds bounce all around in there like a bunch of ping pong balls. It's also really open so it's hard to really figure out where I am. If I go there with someone else it's okay, but really can't go there by myself.” Nick, a 23-year-old-man with double amputations who used a wheelchair for mobility, expressed the opposite perception in that he felt the facility and equipment was accessible and met his accommodation needs. However, he was unsure if he could be included in some of the outdoor recreation programs and trips offered at the recreation center on his campus. Nick stated:

I love to be in the outdoors and, before I lost my legs, I hunted, canoed, kayaked and all that stuff.

I see kayak trips and stuff offered through the Adventure Center and don't know if they could or would be able to fit me in. It's one thing to go there and uh, lift [weights], but another if I want to go a step further.

Participants who use wheelchairs discussed needing adequate space to meet their specific needs relative to this dimension of a *right fit*. Kyle, a 23-year-old male with a T-6 spinal cord injury, described needing additional space between weight and exercise machines to maneuver his chair and transfer to machines. Jay and Clare stated that space to move about in the locker rooms and accessible features such as showers was important to them, but viewed these aspects as something they expected to be in place.

### Meaningful and Valued Aspects of Participation

Participants were asked about the meaningful and valued aspects of participation in leisure time physical activity on their campuses to understand what they held important about these experiences. The other purpose of this question was to delve into their perspectives of social justice relative to inclusion in this aspect of college life. The interest was to understand whether and to what degree leisure time physical activity provided a valued and valid/meaningful experience. Two themes emerged in this portion of the inquiry, *quality of life* and *connectedness*.

**Quality of life.** This theme had a range of dimensions, from enhancing quality of life to a reminder of life prior to acquiring a disability. Clare and Ashley were enthusiastic in discussing the value and meaning of engagement in their chosen leisure activities. For them and others this engagement enhanced their quality of life. Clare stated, "For me swimming is an equalizer. I can be as competitive or as determined to push myself as anyone else in the pool and that's important to me." Ashley claimed that she did not do activities that she was not excited about, "I love to be outdoors so anything that gets me outside, I'm in for. For me it means freedom from built environments, which sometimes I find confining, like the walls close in on me." She went on to say that if she could not get outdoors she would "not be loving life." Denise, a 19-year-old female with T-6 spinal cord injury, who loved dancing, discussed the narrow view she felt her peers had about her abilities and capabilities. Specifically she stated that her experiences led her to believe that her

peers without disabilities felt there is only one way to execute a skill such as dancing. Denise stated:

I like to broaden people's ideas of how stuff can be done and what I can do. Like there's not one way to dive or dance. I love to dance and use my chair to do it. And even though I use my chair, it's still dancing. Like, you should have seen my Zumba teacher's face the first time I showed up. She was like, 'Really? You are going to do this?' And I just started following what they were doing and moving in my chair and stuff. It was a real rush.

The common thread between these students was that they valued being able to do these activities. While their reasons for valuing their leisure time activities varied, they held a high degree of importance in their lives.

The other dimension of this theme highlighted the experiences some have living with a disability. In particular, engagement or lack of engagement in leisure time physical activity brought to light the lack of opportunities, equity, or differences between these students and their peers without disabilities. Lydia described her engagement in activities as "lame." By that she meant that, compared to the activities she did before her onset of m.s., what she currently engaged in was less rigorous or interesting to her. "I look at what other 24-year-olds are doing and what I used to do and what I'm doing is just lame. It just always reminds me of what I can't do any more." Lydia stated that she felt very self-conscious about her participation in any physical activity. However, she continued to do so and valued it because she knew it was important to staying healthy and countering the effects of m.s., but it was not something she felt that enhanced her quality of life. Nick expressed a similar perspective in that participating in physical activity was a reminder that his life is different since his limb loss, "I was always really active like playing paintball, hunting, mountain biking and that kind of stuff. I can't do that stuff now. Or if I do, it will be different."

When probed about trying the things he used to do, Nick responded, "I don't know if I will like it the way I used to and I just haven't 'gone there' yet to try those things. Um, uh, I might not like them. I kinda miss doing them and I just haven't 'gone there.'" Others talked about having opportunities for inclusion in valuable and valid activities, particularly in comparison to students without disabilities. Susan (20) and Kate



(19), females with spastic c.p., discussed the lack of opportunity and equity in what is available to them. Susan said, "I look around at the rec[reation center] and feel there's very little for me to do here. About the only thing I can do is swim. Then I look at the program book and again find few things I can do." When probed as to what she would value doing, she offered, "Chair exercise classes would be good or group line dancing or something that I could use the skills I have." Kate raised a point related to equity in that she was paying for her campus recreation center and services with the fees she paid, but felt there was little in which she could engage. According to Kate, "I can't get excited or interested in things that are not designed to include me. They [activity options] do nothing for me."

Interestingly, Susan and Kate also described a disability sub-culture that does not encourage people with disabilities to be physically active. Kate said that when she was growing up she was never encouraged by parents, teachers, or medical personnel to be physically active so the idea of participating in leisure time physical activity was a fairly new concept for her. Susan shared this perspective and felt that this sub-culture contributed to the low expectations people without disabilities have toward the abilities and capabilities of people with disabilities to be physically active. Craig, a 24-year-old male with spina bifida, felt that others did not view him as someone who needed or wanted to participate in physical activity. He said that when he has gone to the campus recreation and fitness center he feels one of two ways, "I feel like I either 'stick out like a sore thumb' or I'm invisible." When probed for clarification, Craig said that when he lifts weights or uses the hand cycle, everyone is watching him and at other times he feels people look past or ignore him.

**Connectedness.** The second theme in this category was the notion of the ways in which leisure time physical activity promotes social connection to others. The meaningfulness of leisure time engagement in physical activities appeared paramount to this theme. Specifically, the participants talked about what the activities did for them socially and emotionally as well as physically, the role the activities played in their lives, and the role of others in the engagement process.

Several participants discussed the ways in which involvement in physically active recreation helped to manage and decrease stress. Kevin described it as his "escape time" in that engagement in physical activity helped him to take a break from the pressures of school.

He stated that it was not just the activity that he went to his campus recreation center for, but to "joke and talk with others. Sometimes we just talk about stupid stuff, but it feels good not to always be talking about school." Abe said that when he did do something physically active, he felt less stressed; "I know I should go there [recreation center] more often, 'cause when I do I feel much better; like when the pressure is building I should just head there to get a break." Ashley explained the meaningfulness of the social aspect of her engagement, "I don't do anything without other people, like I feel like what's the point? I like to mostly do outdoor stuff but if I have to I'll do indoor stuff if that's what others want to do." Denise felt the way to make new friends was through the dance classes she participated in, "We have something in common to talk about and maybe do together. It's like meeting and making friends who have that thing that connects them already."

Another dimension of this theme was the *role* connectedness played in their lives when engaging in leisure time physical activities. Many of the participants discussed how involvement helps to meet others, whether it is peers with or without disabilities. Clare expressed that participation in activities provided an opportunity to show her peers without disabilities what she was capable of doing. Clare stated, "Sometimes I feel people have really low expectations of what people who use chairs can do so I love to show what I can do." Jay shared a similar sentiment as Clare, but also expressed that being engaged in physically active recreation created a sense of belonging, "You know, like I'm a part of things that go on, on campus. Like I can go to the rec *and* to watch the basketball games." Maryn and Bryan described their small social circles and how these narrowed the range of overall leisure activities they engaged in. Both said they felt uncomfortable doing the social activities on campus (e.g., concerts) and that, if they were more involved in campus recreation activities that might not be the case. Nick stated that participating in physical activities on campus gave him something to talk about with others, "Like, before I was injured, that was a lot of what my buddies and I talked about, hunting and kayaking and stuff. I can talk about weights and stuff with them [others who are lifting]." Even though Ellen felt it difficult to keep up with the dance instructor, she said it was a topic she could use to connect with others. Ellen said, "I can see like when everyone is having a hard time with the steps and stuff I can talk to the others about

it, like, ‘Man, that was wicked,’ and we’ll have that in common.”

Several participants described the role of their engagement in campus-based leisure time physical activity as giving them the confidence to try other things. Kate stated that even though she did not participate very much in the physically active opportunities, having done a few things gave her the confidence to join a sorority. She claimed her confidence stemmed from the positive interactions she had with her peers and felt the more social aspects of campus life would work better for her given the nature of her disability. Kevin described how his involvement in rock climbing has given him the sureness to try other activities, particularly outdoor pursuits. He stated, “I’m strong enough to rock climb so I figured I could do mountain biking as well with a hand cycle. So there was a trip last spring so I went. It was cool, everything was cool.” Jay raised a negative aspect of the role his engagement played, that being creating what he termed as a “hero syndrome.” By that he meant that there was a perspective his peers without disabilities expressed to him that made him feel like he was extraordinary for engaging in activities. Even though he voiced feeling quite included and comfortable engaging in several physical activities, he also experienced his peers saying things like, “Dude, you are so brave,” “It is so cool you do this; I don’t know if I could,” and “I don’t know how you do it man, you are really awesome.” He said comments like these left him feeling like he was “on the outside looking in” where he was compared to others based on his disability.

## Discussion

According to the study participants - college students with physical or sensory disabilities - their perceptions of engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus can be understood through the contexts of a right fit and the meaningful and valued aspects of participation. Through their lens, we can better understand their perceptions based on their individual needs, leisure interests, aspects of quality of life, and the meaningfulness of feeling connected.

### Right Fit

The *right fit* was an overriding theme that emerged from all participants, but with various dimensions. One of the more meaningful outcomes of this study

was the insight into how an activity had to be the right fit given the individual’s personal needs (e.g., personal hygiene), adaptation needs (e.g., accessible equipment, facility orientation), and leisure interests. In general, people with disabilities are less likely to participate in physically active recreation or fitness on a regular basis (Rimmer et al., 2004). Activities not meeting the personal, adaptational, or leisure interests may provide practical and theoretical explanations for low involvement of people with disabilities in physically active leisure. From a theoretical perspective, if students do not feel their needs or interests are taken into consideration, they are less likely to be involved in these types of activities (Astin, 1999).

Theory of involvement also asserts that student learning and development are directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement and engagement in a program. In other words, for students to learn and grow, they need to actively engage in their environments. Milem and Berger (1997) found that social integration on college campuses was more influential in predicting persistence to earn college degrees than academic integration. If students with disabilities are not actively engaged in leisure time physical activity on their college campuses, then they will gain little to nothing from this aspect of college life.

### Quality of Life

Another dimension of a lack of engagement in leisure time physical activity is what some participants described as a sub-culture that does not encourage people with disabilities to be physically active. This subculture was raised when participants were asked to discuss meaningful and valued experiences. Their comments led to the emergence of the *quality of life* theme. Evidence supporting this perception of a sub-culture of inactivity was found on several dimensions. For instance, two participants discussed not being encouraged by family members or others to participate in physically active endeavors; thus, it was not a valid component of their life. Others discussed a lack of options available to them for active engagement and a perception that programs and facilities were not designed with them in mind. For instance, the students with visual impairments indicated that the facilities were overwhelming in size, making auditory cues difficult. Another dimension of this sub-culture is the low expectations people without disabilities expressed about what those with disabilities can accomplish. This

was evident in descriptions of the “hero syndrome” where any type of engagement was viewed as extraordinary. This outcome supports previous findings that attitudinal and cultural barriers can prevent people with disabilities from participating in physical activities (Rimmer et al., 2004). Lundberg et al. (2011) reported that negative labeling, stigmatizing, and stereotyping of people with disabilities were barriers to participation in adaptive sport and recreation activities. Specifically, Lundberg et al. reported that people with disabilities perceived less was expected of them physically and mentally by society. This attitudinal barrier resulted in not only fewer activity options, but a lack of interest and motivation to pursue sport and recreation activities. Addressing this requires a shift in perceptions about people with disabilities from viewing them as passive spectators of activity to engaged participants. Another conceptual area that may explain this finding is the notion of social justice.

Social justice is founded on the tenants of respect, dignity, and equal opportunity. This also encompasses the right to fair treatment and a share of the benefits of society based on the foundations of human rights and equality of all people (Lindsey & Sessoms, 2006). Smart (2001) offered parameters relative to understanding social justice and individuals with disabilities: (a) everyone receives *equal treatment*, (b) everyone receives what he/she *earns*, and (c) everyone receives what he/she *needs*. Overall, these parameters mean the opportunity for valuable and valid life experiences (Silva & Howe, 2012). A lack of social justice for individuals with disabilities may offer insight into the notion of a sub-culture of inactivity. In particular, social justice may explain the data that pointed to a lack of equity in opportunities, in building design that limited engagement and program offerings that had few if any options for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the activities. What is clear from this study is that opportunities and access to physically active leisure time activities is not equal between students with and without disabilities. This is problematic because it limits the rights and opportunity of students with disabilities to grow and develop as human beings including learning skills, providing the opportunity for mutual development of social acceptance, and exercising their option to have a healthy active lifestyle. Leisure environments can be contexts that connect people with and without disabilities and promote positive attitudes and social acceptance (Devine, 2004; Devine & Wilhite, 1999;

Lundberg, et al., 2011). Applying social justice by promoting leisure time physical activity for college students with disabilities frames this approach in offering equitable valuable and valid leisure experiences (Devine & Piatt, 2012; Silva & Howe, 2012), thus enhancing the students’ quality of life.

### Connectedness

The last theme that emerged from the data was *connectedness*. Participants noted that they engaged in leisure time physical activities not only for the physical benefit, but also for the social and emotional benefit they gain from the activity. Connectedness when engaging in physical activities aided in decreasing stress and creating bonds with others. Leisure environments are known as contexts where relationships and bonds are built (Kleiber, 1999), whether a person has a disability or not. Lundberg et al. (2011) reported that participation in sport and recreation provided people with disabilities a peer group and social support. However, these individuals were participating in disability-only activities, not inclusive options with their peers without disabilities. Staeger-Wilson and Sampson (2012) reported that students with disabilities felt more connected to their university and that they were valued members of the university community when the institutions took their needs into consideration when designing recreation facilities and programs. Connectedness also helped students with disabilities meet their peers who had common leisure interests around which they could connect. For instance, Nick felt that being involved in weight lifting activities gave him something to converse about with his peers. Some participants reported that their involvement empowered them to do other activities, made them feel more connected to campus, and gave them opportunities to counter stereotypes.

Leisure time physical activity can improve quality of life, health, self-efficacy, and community involvement (Devine, 2004; Giacobbi, Stancil, Hardin, & Bryant, 2008; Lundberg et al., 2011). Giacobbi and colleagues reported that other people were a driving motivational force in continued involvement in physical activity, a behavior important for healthy active living. In addition, this study supports what has been found in previous studies, which is that the social aspect of a leisure activity was more important to individuals’ engagement than the activity itself (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). Thus, the social aspects of physical

activity, such as connectedness, should be treated with equal importance as the physical outcomes.

### **Barriers and Facilitators to Participation**

A secondary purpose of this examination was to understand the perceptions of college students with mobility or visual impairments on barriers and facilitators to participating in leisure time physical activity. Directly and indirectly, the participants offered a number of perceptions that inform this segment of the study.

Most participants shared similar perspectives on aspects that facilitated their engagement, particularly when discussions centered on the atmosphere of an environment. Generally, those who participated in physically active leisure regularly noted the importance of a welcoming atmosphere. They used terms such as “fitting in” and “just like any other guy,” and noted the positive attitudes of staff. Participants also discussed the importance of the accessibility of the facility, equipment, and layout of the facility to their participation. Accessibility also included having someone available to orient students to the facility and its amenities. Another feature that facilitated engagement was having activities that students with disabilities were interested in and in which they could actively participate. When students found activities that they could do, such as swimming or yoga, they expressed satisfaction in numerous ways. Lastly, students expressed a strong desire to engage in physical activities that provided social experiences and helped them to socially connect with others. These findings support previous studies that reported the need and usefulness of accessible facilities and features in promoting physical activity for individuals with disabilities (Rimmer et al., 2004; Zabriske, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005), and the need for accepting environments including positive attitudes exhibited by staff members (Devine & O’Brien, 2007). It also extends the understanding of the needs of students with disabilities for physical activity to be feasible relative to location, time of day, access to facilities to care for personal needs, and pace of an activity.

The barriers described by participants reflect theoretical and practical implications. Interestingly, some students discussed a sub-culture of inactivity within the context of their lives. Two participants discuss how they were not encouraged to be physically active through their youth. One participant discussed how any form of activity was viewed by people without disabilities as extraordinary. While these views juxta-

pose each other, they may be “two sides of the same coin” from a social construction theory framework. Social construction of disability posits that society assigns meaning to disability in predominantly negative ways (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). We associate those meanings to behaviors, objects, and language as they relate to disability and perpetuate these meanings through our social interactions. Historically, the social construction of disability has reflected a negative meaning of disability including stigmatizing and stereotypical perspectives. The barriers described by the participants of this study have been found in previous examinations (Giacobbi, et al, 2008; Lundberg, et al., 2011). They are examples that can be explained by social construction theory in that in physically active contexts, society assumes people with disabilities cannot be actively engaged and if/when they are, it is so extra ordinary that it is heroic (Devine & Wilhite, 2000). If those who design, plan, and operate campus recreation services continue to assume students with disabilities will not be active users of these services, then the social construction of disability will continue to be perpetuated.

The other significant barrier described by participants was the lack of equity. Students discussed feeling like there were few to no opportunities for them to participate in physical activities. They also discussed not being taken into consideration in the activity program planning process, nor did they perceive that they were always welcomed when they did participate. Prior studies have also found that people with disabilities were not readily taken into consideration when physically active options were planned or offered (Groff & Kleiber, 2001; Lundbert et al., 2011). Giacobbi et al. (2008), found that not only does active engagement in physical activity boost the psychological, social, and physical benefits, but it increased the quality of life for people with disabilities. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, student involvement in campus activities not only can lead to academic success but can aid in retaining students in college to graduation (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Henchy, 2011). Applying the principles of universal design (removing physical and environmental barriers to people with disabilities) could be used to address this reported inequity (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011). In particular, applying the principle of *equitable use* in physical and environmental designs could decrease the barriers described in the recreation facilities. Another principle of universal design that

could be helpful if applied to the findings in this study is the principle of *flexibility in use* (Roberts et al., 2011). By applying this principle, instructors would vary their teaching methods, activities, and expectations that all skill outcomes are exactly the same.

### Limitations

While this study extends the literature on active living, quality of life, barriers, and facilitators to participation in leisure time physical activity for young adults with mobility and visual impairments, it is not without limitations. One limitation was the single interview procedure with each participant. Multiple interviews can explore not only the perceptions, but extend knowledge of experiences students with disabilities have when engaging in leisure time physical activity. This procedure can also further delve into the students' perspectives of meaningful and valued aspects of participation to further understand motives, benefits, and equity issues. Another limitation of this study was that it lacked a quantitative comparison. Studies that have examined involvement in campus activities with increased academic success and retention to graduation did not specify if any of the subjects were students with disabilities, thus it is not known how or to what extent the benefits described by participants in the present study might influence their own academic success or retention. An extension of this study could include a comparison of the grades, graduation rates, and certain health indicators of students with disabilities who participate in leisure time physical activity and those who do not. Lastly, this study was limited to the inclusion of research participants with mobility and visual impairments. Further inquiries could also explore the perceptions of students with other disabilities such as hearing impairments or mental health disabilities.

### Conclusions

This study explored the perceptions of college students with disabilities about their access to and engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus. It also sought to understand the meaningful and valued aspects of participation in physically active leisure on their campus. Rich qualitative descriptions of the participants' perspectives on their engagement and attempts of engagement and what was meaningful and valued by them, revealed important themes,

particularly the notion of a right fit. From a theoretical perspective, if the context and activity are a right fit for the student with a disability, they are more likely to engage in physical activities. In addition, if the experience was meaningful and valued, the students reported a higher quality of life and stronger connectedness to others and their campus. Previous studies about the benefits of engagement in campus life such as leisure time engagement in physical activity on retention and academic success have not included students with disabilities (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Henchy, 2011; Miller, 2011). Given the findings of those studies, it would be beneficial to examine those constructs with students with disabilities.

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