

# Power Soccer: Experiences of Students Using Power Wheelchairs in a Collegiate Athletic Club

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## Abstract

Intercollegiate athletics provides an opportunity for improving the societal perceptions and overall quality of life of physically disabled persons. Athletic opportunities in the collegiate atmosphere allow such students to be socially, psychologically, and physically engaged. This study focused on how involvement in a Power Soccer collegiate athletic club using power wheelchairs influenced the collegiate experience of physically disabled students. As a result of participating in Power Soccer, participants reported higher levels of social interactions and independence, an appreciation of the opportunity to compete and participate on a team, and an increased amount of self-confidence.

Mary Allison Milford is a collegiate wheelchair basketball athlete who uses a wheelchair as part of her sport. Unfortunately her university does not offer student-athletes with disabilities, such as Milford, the same funding and resources that it offers student-athletes in traditional able-bodied sports (Lum, 2007). This discrepancy outwardly demonstrates the perceived incongruence between people with physical disabilities and participation in organized athletics. It also demonstrates the stigma and perceptions of incompetence associated with persons with disabilities in contemporary society (Hedrick, 2000). However, as Wolfensberger (1983) argued in his theory of social role valorization, these poor perceptions may be improved when persons demonstrate competence within social roles that are highly valued, such as that of an intercollegiate athlete.

This study focused on how involvement in a collegiate athletic club, specifically Power Soccer, influenced the collegiate experience of students with physical disabilities. Intercollegiate athletics provides an opportunity for improving the societal perceptions about and overall quality of life of persons with physical disabilities (Hedrick & Hedrick, 1993). Athletic

opportunities in the collegiate atmosphere allow such students to be socially, psychologically, and physically engaged. Campus activities that enhance the visibility of student athletes who use wheelchairs hold the promise of influencing broader social perceptions about the abilities of individuals with physical disabilities.

## Review of Related Literature

This review of related literature introduces Wolfensberger's (1983, 2000) work on social role theory, social role valorization, and social role integration; provides an overview of students with disabilities in higher education; and concludes with a discussion of athletic opportunities and how they relate to student success during the collegiate experience.

### Social Role Valorization

Social role valorization (SRV), a schema based on social role theory, serves as the theoretical foundation of this study (Wolfensberger, 1983, 2000). This theory identifies ways in which specific subgroups of people are devalued, and therefore wounded, by other specific subgroups or by society as a whole. SRV is the

successor to Wolfensberger's (1972) earlier theory of normalization, which proposed methods through which mentally impaired individuals could become more fully integrated into society. While normalization identified specific goals for devalued individuals, SRV provides an overarching theory through which researchers may better understand how such individuals come to be devalued. The term valorization was therefore utilized because of the focus on the concept of value. Specific aspects of SRV include social roles, social classes, wounds, and social value.

SRV is primarily driven by the social roles that people occupy. Every social role is defined by the duties, responsibilities, and behaviors that are recognized by other members of society. These expectations are significant, as the fulfillment of social roles is determined by them. Individuals who fulfill the societal expectations of a specific role will be largely seen as a member of that role, while those who fail, or choose not to carry out these behaviors, will then be viewed as occupying a different role. "People who fill roles that are positively valued by others will generally be afforded by the latter the good things in life, but people who fill roles that are devalued by others will typically get badly treated by them" (Wolfensberger, 2000, p. 105). Certain roles such as college professor, public office holder, and star athlete, are specifically identified as more likely to be valued positively than others, such as garbage collector, beggar, or invalid. One purpose, then, of SRV is to posit a method in which the social roles of devalued groups can be upgraded in the perceptions of other highly valued groups.

Wolfensberger (2000) also identified seven specific classes of people who are typically devalued in Western society. Among these are "people who are impaired in some way, as perhaps in their senses, bodies, or minds" (Wolfensberger, 2000, p. 106), people whose visible bodily attributes are viewed in a negative fashion, as well as people whose skills are seen as not useful to society. Many negative outcomes are possible when a person lives within one of these devalued classes and Wolfensberger labeled these outcomes as "wounds" (p. 107). These wounds include social rejection, functional and physical impairment, severed relationships, and in extreme instances, poverty or death.

Regarding the importance of social roles, Wolfensberger posits that every aspect of one's life is impacted by the social roles one occupies. For instance, relationships, economic status, and even where one lives

are all in some fashion determined by social roles. He contended that individuals who are otherwise impaired may overcome the negative outcomes of such impairment by occupying highly-valued social roles. Based on these conclusions, Lemay (1999) identified the occurrence of role avidity, or role hunger, as one's strong desire to occupy a positively-valued social role. Role avidity is typically present in those who desire stronger social relationships but are born into roles that may limit social interaction, such as a physically impaired child who is unable to participate in the same activities as other children.

Lemay (2006) further asserted that social roles may be placed in two broad categories, primary or secondary. Primary roles are not contingent on one's immediate environment, which may change frequently. Long-lasting relationships are developed within the context of these roles since people are typically born into them. Examples of primary roles include son or daughter and brother or sister. Secondary roles are dependent on setting and behaviors, and they are frequently achieved through the relationships formed within one's primary roles. For instance, through the mediation of the primary role partners, namely parents or guardians, a child may earn secondary roles status through participation in daycare or sporting activities. As these roles continue to mature and develop, one's social circle continues to widen and more opportunities to adopt secondary roles become available. As a result, it is quite possible that secondary roles may eventually become one's primary roles. Lemay argued that, through this process, undervalued groups may achieve valued primary roles and social integration.

### **Students with Disabilities in Higher Education**

In a study in which 244 undergraduate students were required to complete a Situational Attitude Scale assessment, Stovall and Sedlacek (1983) found that students adopted significantly negative attitudes when acknowledging the possibility of coming into close, personal contact with students in wheelchairs. Examples of situations in which this contact would be required included being asked on a date or discovering an immediate family member was intending on marrying someone who uses a wheelchair. The study also identified similar attitudes in situations in which personal contact was not required, such as finding out a student in a wheelchair was hired for a job or accepted into a university the participants might attend. These

findings support Wolfensberger's (2000) claim that physically-impaired individuals compose a devalued class in Western society. For the purposes of this study, the presence of such physically-impaired individuals on university campuses was specifically considered.

Students with disabilities have entered higher education in significantly increasing numbers over the past twenty years (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, & Ristow, 1998; Jarro, 1993). Over two million students with identified disabilities participated in postsecondary education in 2008, up from nearly 1.4 million in 2000 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009, using data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid studies in 2000, 2004, and 2008). That is an increase from 6.1% in 2000 to 10.8% in 2008. These students have similar demographic characteristics (i.e., age, race, gender, and schools attended) as students without disabilities.

Additionally, the presence of college students with orthopedic or mobility impairments, including students who use wheelchairs, has changed over the past several years. Of the 1.4 million students who reported a disability in 2000, 29% of them specifically indicated orthopedic or mobility impairment as their main disability, equaling approximately 406,000 students (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009). Unfortunately these students with orthopedic or mobility impairments do not have the same access to athletics as able-bodied students. Only a few colleges or universities provided varsity-level sports for students with disabilities (Markle & Spangler, 2009). When athletic opportunities are provided for students with physical disabilities, the university's athletics department is often not involved and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2008) does not govern any of the disability-specific sports. As a result, these students struggle with funding for their teams and do not have access to facilities and other amenities that able-bodied teams have (Lum, 2007).

#### **Athletic Involvement and Student Success.**

Overall student engagement is an essential aspect of a successful collegiate experience (Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This engagement is defined by involvement in both in-class and out-of-class activities, including intercollegiate athletics. While the student is responsible for his/her own individual effort to get involved, the institution is also responsible for providing opportunities that encourage this type of engagement. Tinto (1975) discussed the roles of aca-

demical and social integration pertaining to the person-environment fit associated with student retention and involvement. Regarding academic integration, an individual's integration was measured in terms of grade performance and intellectual development. Social integration took place primarily through informal peer group associations, interaction with faculty/staff personnel, and extracurricular activities within the college. Of the multiple forms of social interaction that occur on the college campus, peer group associations have the greatest influence on a student's social integration. Shulman and Bowen (2001) found that students who are deeply involved in any type of organized activity are more likely to persist through graduation than peers who are not as seriously engaged. In regards to SRV and its implications for physically-impaired persons, the concept of social integration is defined as "the valued presence and participation of individuals with disabilities in mainstream society" (Lemay, 2006, p. 1). A primary concern is that individuals who remain in a socially-devalued subgroup will not obtain any social connections outside of the subgroup, and achieving successful social integration is identified as a method for overcoming these boundaries.

Multiple authors have discussed the benefits of participation in intercollegiate athletics by wheelchair users. Wheelchair basketball players reported higher levels of self-determination, which is positively associated with coping skills (Perreault & Vallerand, 2007). Goodwin et al. (2009), exploring the social experience of wheelchair rugby, found that participants positively identified with a shared sense of community, fulfillment of need, and shared emotional connections as they expressed themselves through the sport. The three themes that emerged from interviews with the players were self-acceptance (i.e., that it's okay to be a quadriplegic), confidence (i.e., don't tell us we can't), and the power of the experience of wheelchair rugby. Adnan, McKenzie, and Miyahara (2001) reported that quad rugby participants had higher levels of self-efficacy than persons without quad rugby experience. For individuals participating in wheelchair dance, increased levels of pride and social integration were the results of unconditional acceptance, the fulfillment of a dream come true, a meaningful experience beyond the wheelchair, and the stronger self (Goodwin, Krohn, & Kuhnle, 2004).

Some researchers, however, have attributed negative outcomes to students' involvement in athletics

regardless of whether or not those students have disabilities. Campbell and Jones (2002) found that wheelchair basketball users experience sources of stress directly associated with being a member of a team, including poor group interaction and communication, relationship issues, and a general lack of disability awareness. Shulman and Bowen (2001) found that recruited athletes were more likely to be given an advantage in the admissions process, which allowed them to enter college with lower academic credentials. They also concluded that students who participated in athletics, particularly in high-profile or revenue-generating sports, were likely to academically under-perform throughout their college career. Astin (1977) partially attributed this underperformance to the athletic subculture that formed on many campuses. This subculture was found to separate athletes from their peers, resulting in a highly pronounced social divide. Though such findings may be considered negative as they relate to the college experience, the opportunities both for athletes to enter college with lower admission standards as well as to academically under-perform while remaining a student, would be identified as two examples of “the good things in life” that society grants to those in a highly-valued social role (Wolfensberger, 2000, p. 105).

This study focused on the athletic experiences of college students who use power wheelchairs, specifically the activity of Power Soccer. Power Soccer was created in France during the 1970s as the first competitive team sport for power wheelchair users (U.S. Power Soccer Association, 2009). Introduced to the United States in the 1980s, the sport has since grown and developed in other countries including England, Canada, Japan, Belgium, and Portugal. In July of 2006, international delegates met in Atlanta, Georgia to ratify a constitution and adopt official game rules. As a result, the Powerchair Football International Federation (FIPFA) was officially established. In October of that year, the United States Power Soccer Association (USPSA) was legally recognized and granted non-profit status. The headquarters for the FIPFA is located in Paris, France, and the USPSA headquarters is in Carmel, Indiana. The USPSA promotes the sport through programs such as tournament play and referee certification. Currently, participants in Power Soccer include those with quadriplegia, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, and other physical disabilities. According to USPSA, “It is the mission

and hope of the USPSA that all persons who use power wheelchairs will have the opportunity to play and experience Power Soccer” (para. 1).

## Method

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of undergraduate wheelchair users who participated in a Power Soccer athletic club and examine how these experiences influenced their self-concepts regarding their academic and social collegiate experiences. Data collection was guided by the following two research questions: (1) What were the experiences of undergraduate wheelchair users who participated in a Power Soccer athletic club? and (2) How did participation in Power Soccer influence the self-concept of each student regarding his/her academic and social collegiate experiences?

## Design of the Study

Since this study sought to answer “questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 13), qualitative methodology was chosen, as it provides a better understanding of social experience and social roles. The study’s design was based on the belief that the students’ experiences could best be understood by analyzing their individual experiences and searching for common themes among these experiences. More specifically, this study was guided by phenomenological methodology because the focus concerned the experiences of a group of people rather than a single individual, and the experiences of this group revolved around a similar concept, or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

The population consisted of 15 undergraduate wheelchair users who were active members of the College Cards or College Fury (pseudonyms) Power Soccer teams during the 2009-2010 academic year. Members of the two Power Soccer teams practiced on a weekly basis and competed in five weekend tournaments through the year. Since Power Soccer has achieved club sport status at the students’ university, the teams were able to reserve space at the campus recreation center. The Power Soccer season culminated in the national championships in June. Both teams at the university were among the 20 teams that qualified for the national championships. Because of the size of the population, all students in the population were invited to participate. Since the researchers had access

to the e-mail addresses of each member of the Power Soccer teams, initial contacts were made through e-mail messages. This message explained the purpose and nature of the study and requested each student's participation. Follow-up personal contact was also made. Nine students agreed to participate, including six males and three females. Four were first-year students, while the other five were sophomores or juniors. All nine research subjects were traditionally aged college students at the time of the study and each was an active participant on one of two Power Soccer teams affiliated with the institution. The identity of each student was protected through the use of a pseudonym. These students were enrolled at a public, four-year, doctoral granting institution in the Midwest. The university had 20,000 students, 17,000 undergraduates and 3,000 graduate students. The university focused on residential undergraduate education with emphases on the professions plus the arts and sciences (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.).

### Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to facilitate the data collection process. This protocol guided flexible interviews that adjusted to the flow of conversation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The structure for this guide was organized to obtain information that would answer the research questions. Questions included, "Why did you decide to join the Power Soccer team?" and "Are there ways the Power Soccer team has influenced your college experience?" Students were encouraged to share stories and personal experiences during the interview process. All identifying information provided by the participants was kept confidential through assigning pseudonyms in transcriptions.

Before any interviews were conducted, a panel of four experts skilled in either the topic or qualitative research methodology reviewed the proposed interview guide. The guide was revised based on the suggestions of this panel. Before any interviews were conducted, the Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the data collection process. Data were collected during the spring semester of 2010. Individual interviews were conducted by one of the authors. The one-on-one interviews took 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in a mutually agreed upon site on campus, such as the campus library or student union. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Two specific qualitative research techniques were utilized to interpret data collected from the interviews. First, the technique of memoing (i.e., reflective notes and ideas upon the completion of each interview) was used, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Preliminary notes were recorded during memoing, which were then used to identify emerging connections and themes during the data collection process. Field notes, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), are "the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data" (p. 108). Following completion of the interviews, the second technique, member checking, was used to ensure the transcriptions faithfully represented the information provided by each participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). When member checking was completed, data were analyzed based on steps identified by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). During Moustakas' (1994) first step, horizontalization, the researchers identified statements from the interviews that addressed how individuals experienced the topic. Second, the authors organized statements identified from multiple interviews during the first step into clusters. This step required revisiting the data to identify themes, or common experiences, among the participants.

These clusters were then used to draw a textural description, which explained the experienced phenomenon, and a structural description, which explained how students experienced the phenomenon. The researchers used the process of "open coding" whereby themes were identified from transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding allowed for a preliminary identification of conceptual categories. Then the researchers reexamined the conceptual categories in relationship to each other, a process referred to as "axial coding." At this point the researchers determined if there were any connections that emerged between the categories. The third part included preparing a narrative about the overall data in relation to the original research questions. The researchers then drew conclusions from these descriptions.

### Findings

This study examined the influence of participation in Power Soccer on the collegiate experiences of traditionally aged college students who used power wheelchairs. Common experiences were studied to

better understand how college students with physical disabilities valued Power Soccer as an activity within higher education. Four main findings emerged from the study: friendships and social interactions, independence, competition and teamwork, and self-confidence.

### **Friendships and Social Interactions**

Participation in Power Soccer clearly influenced the social interactions of the students involved. Every student interviewed indicated that their friendships were positively affected, or that new, meaningful friendships were created, through their participation in this activity. Five of the nine participants spoke about friendships with their teammates as their favorite aspect of Power Soccer involvement. Of the other four students, three specifically mentioned that friendships developed on the Power Soccer team as something they will always remember. Nick explained, "I'll always remember the friendships that I've built. . . . I'm sure that throughout my entire life I'll always be in contact with them. I'll always have those memories of playing together."

For Kyle, the experience of developing deeper relationships with other students in wheelchairs was very meaningful.

Before I came to State College [pseudonym], I was the only one in a wheelchair that I knew or hung out with, and now I'm hanging out with people in chairs all the time. It's mostly my teammates, and I mean, we live in the same hall too, so it's almost like a family.

John expressed a similar sentiment about developing friendships and feeling like part of a family.

The friendships with my teammates, that's the one thing that I like the most. I talk to them and hang out with them outside of the classroom, and just being friends, it's great, but being involved in something that we all love, it's even better. You feel like you're more than friends, more than teammates, you feel like you're family.

Students specifically spoke about how the process of growing closer as a team influenced the quality of their friendships. This process included learning how to best communicate with each other during practices and games, as well as learning to trust each other

throughout these experiences. Rachel indicated that this process helped her overcome her own shyness.

I don't just go to random people and start talking and making friends very easily, so this kind of forces me to because we have to have this chemistry and be friends and know that we're going to be there for each other on the team, and outside of it.

According to Brian, when playing Power Soccer you have to "know your teammates a lot and communicate with them. You want to have a trust with your team, and I think a lot of that is getting to know your teammates." Though all the participants spoke positively of their relationships with teammates, friendships outside of the Power Soccer team were not as universally strong. Rachel explained, "I don't hang out with hardly anybody else, so I've kind of distanced myself away from other people. I'm trying to work on that."

When asked if they would recommend participation in Power Soccer to other students who use power wheelchairs, every individual responded positively. Three of these individuals cited friendships and the social aspect of the sport as reasons for this recommendation. Aaron explained that these friendships were easy to form because of the common interests of everyone on the team. According to Kyle, "It gives you the experience of being on a team, interacting with others, and trusting people."

### **Independence**

Participants in this study repeatedly identified a sense of independence as an overwhelmingly positive aspect of participation in Power Soccer. Particularly within the setting of competitive sports, students indicated that they had not experienced this sense of independence before. Previous athletic experiences were generally positive, but active participation usually required the aid of able-bodied individuals. One example of this was Challenger Baseball, which three participants in this study referred to when asked about their previous experiences with sports. This activity required an able-bodied person to accompany each participant to help them perform activities they were unable to do. In contrast, Power Soccer gave students in power wheelchairs their first opportunity to participate in a competitive activity without the help of anyone else.

Out of the nine individuals who were interviewed, five specifically referred to this sense of independence as a beneficial component of Power Soccer. Lindsay compared it to her previous experiences by saying, "I'm used to having somebody else help me do something, and they always have their two words to say, and when I'm playing on the court, it's me making the decisions and communicating with my teammates." Similarly, Daniel and Hannah were both grateful for the opportunity to fully participate in a sport without help from other people. According to Hannah, "College sports, you have to do everything, and actually do it all, and then with soccer, I could do it, and it was me, because my chair is who I am." When asked to explain why he ultimately decided to participate in Power Soccer, Daniel referred to the independence of the players by noting, "Once I just have help to get in my wheelchair and get all my stuff on that I need, I'm pretty good with doing the plays and everything, and you're just out there doing it for you."

In addition to the independent nature of participation in the sport, students appreciated the opportunity they had to improve upon their own skills. Especially within the context of competitive sports, students had never previously experienced this sense of ownership regarding their own skill level. When asked about his favorite aspect of Power Soccer, Nick responded, "I really like the self-improvement. I want to become the best player that I can." Similarly, John spoke about his own self-improvement when asked about his favorite aspect of the sport, "I just love the fact that you have power and control of what you can be good at . . . you are the one controlling the ball. The coaches coach, but you play. I just love that independence."

### **Competition and Teamwork**

A majority of the students interviewed had not experienced athletic competition prior to Power Soccer. Previous athletic involvement was typically recreational in nature. Although these were generally positive experiences, students appreciated the competitive nature of Power Soccer. Six of the nine participants specifically indicated the level of competition in Power Soccer as a valuable outcome of participation. For Rachel, this experience was completely new. She reported, "I've never done anything like this before. The competition is really good because I've never competed in anything, ever, and it's just fun to be on a team."

For students in wheelchairs who had a naturally

competitive personality, participation in Power Soccer provided a healthy outlet to express this personal quality. Kyle explained, "I'm a very competitive guy . . . I've never been part of a team where I can actually be the one that participates in helping the team win." In a similar fashion, Nick explained that the competitive nature of Power Soccer was actually his favorite element of the sport, "I'm a very competitive person, and it lets me show my competitiveness, and show how skilled I am and try to improve."

Three students spoke about the competitive nature of Power Soccer when comparing it to their previous experiences with sports. When asked about his favorite aspect of Power Soccer, Brian responded, "I really like the competition, you know, wanting to win. It's not like Challenger Baseball where you win just for playing. It's not an 'everybody-wins' sport, and you have to work hard at it."

John spoke about this competition when asked why he decided to join the team. "It's not an 'everybody wins' sport, it's not a sympathy sport, it's really competitive. If you're not good, you're not going to win anything, unless you keep on practicing. I just fell in love with it." John further explained that this level of competition was the reason he recommended that other students in wheelchairs participate in the sport. "It's just a competitive outlet. I think everyone has some competitiveness in them . . . sometimes I think you need to blow off some steam, and it's a good way to do that."

Students also indicated that those who are unfamiliar with Power Soccer typically do not understand the level of competition associated with it, and typically do not take it seriously. Lindsay expressed frustration over this:

It's hard to get people to understand that this isn't just another disabled sport. It's a real sport with real competition. It's not an 'everybody wins' type of game, and usually after they come for the first time, they're hooked. I was, anyway.

### **Self-Confidence**

Improved self-confidence was the third recurring theme and a positive outcome of participation in Power Soccer. Eight of the nine participants spoke about Power Soccer's positive impact on their self-confidence. These students referred to three specific outcomes of the sport when explaining their increased

self-confidence: forming friendships and creating social opportunities, improved communication, and improving one's personal skills. The social aspect was particularly important to Brian in this regard:

I know without having Power Soccer I wouldn't have as many friends, and I think having a lot of friends helps with your self-confidence . . . I would be alone a lot more, and I wouldn't have anything to really be proud of.

Hannah also indicated that the social aspect of Power Soccer was significant in helping her develop a higher level of confidence. When asked to identify her favorite part of being involved in the activity, she responded, "Just getting to know people, and being part of a group." Later in the interview, she explained how this impacted her own level of confidence. "I mentioned before that I'm really shy, and so I think now that I'm actually a part of the team I'm more outgoing. Yeah, I think I'm more confident."

Four individuals acknowledged that participation in Power Soccer required them to assertively communicate with their teammates during games and practices, which they had previously avoided. They each expressed that this communication had significant influence on their confidence in social situations. Both Rachel and Aaron experienced profound changes in their social lives as a result of this newfound confidence. Rachel indicated that, before she started playing Power Soccer, she was "extremely quiet. I didn't talk to hardly anybody except for my closest friends and family, but now I'm just a lot louder and more confident, and I can talk to people, and it doesn't really bother me anymore." Aaron said that when he was in high school, he "barely talked to people, except for the circle of friends I was in. Now I can talk to almost anybody and not really feel anxious or nervous."

John was also thankful for the level of confidence he developed in social situations. He expressed that his participation in Power Soccer caused him to become more open-minded in regards to establishing a group of friends on campus. "It's made me talk to more people and be more open. I think if I didn't have that with Power Soccer, I don't think I'd be as outgoing as I am now."

The independent nature of Power Soccer created opportunities wherein participants felt they could improve upon their personal skills, which further contributed to higher levels of self-confidence. Daniel was

able to view this improvement over a period of time. He explained, "As I progressed through the years, my abilities and skill levels have gotten better . . . it gives you a chance of doing something to become better, and so it has helped my confidence level." Both Kyle and Lindsay recognized how this self-improvement impacted their confidence levels in other areas of life. According to Kyle:

It gives me something I'm good at. I can be good at it, and not necessarily brag about myself, but in my head I know this is cool, I did this, that type of thing, so it gives me a little more confidence, and it builds the confidence in other things that I do, like going to school or interviewing for a job.

Similarly, Lindsay emphasized how important Power Soccer was to improving her personal skills as a college student:

The things that I learn from Power Soccer I use throughout my college experience, from being more assertive and speaking up, and being a better communicator, and independently thinking . . . it's helped me be more confident in myself, and that type of thing, which has helped me, I believe, in my school work and communication with teachers and potential employers.

## Discussion

Involvement in the Power Soccer program had several positive effects on the participants, including their independence, their ability to build stronger friendships and social interactions, and their communication and interpersonal skills. The significance of these outcomes to students with physical disabilities, which are frequently noted as positive aspects of the collegiate experience, is addressed in the following discussion.

### Independence

For college students who use power wheelchairs, participation in a Power Soccer program may present them with their first and only independent experience within the context of athletics. Students place high value on this independence, which also has universally positive impacts on the general collegiate experience. To cultivate these positive benefits, educators, particularly those who work in disability support offices,

should work to provide students who use power wheelchairs with the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate or recreational programs.

The independence gained through participation in Power Soccer had a significant impact on the social roles, and therefore social values, of the students involved. As each individual in this study operated a power wheelchair due to a physical disability, he/she embodied a negatively-valued social role in accordance with Wolfensberger's (1983, 2000) schema. These students occupied this role at the outset of their respective college careers, but the self-confidence each individual derived from their newfound sense of independence positively influenced the way that he or she viewed this role's socially-defined limitations. The resulting confidence enabled these individuals to overcome the strict boundaries placed by society on the role of a physically-disabled person. Additionally, this confidence was affirmed by the interest able-bodied students displayed in the athletic club, further validating the opportunities for these students to overcome such boundaries. Without these opportunities, these individuals may have remained in their initial negatively-valued social role throughout the entirety of their collegiate experience. Overall, participation in Power Soccer provided them with the chance to establish competency in a new skill set, as well as work towards occupying a highly valued social role: that of an athlete.

Establishing competence and autonomy are both vital steps in forming a healthy identity through the college experience (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In fact, developing competence is identified as a foundational event which must occur before any progression can be made towards establishing identity and ultimately integrity. The independent nature of Power Soccer created an ideal environment for the students in this study to build upon their own physical, intellectual, and interpersonal competencies. Furthermore, since these students were required to attend practices and participate in competitive events without the aid of other, able-bodied individuals, each was also able to make significant progress in developing a personal sense of autonomy. The opportunity for students with physical disabilities to participate in athletic events provides a life beyond the wheelchair and a stronger self (Goodwin et al., 2004).

Because of the differences in the nature of disability services in the secondary and postsecondary arenas,

gaining independence and self-advocacy skills are vital for the successful transition to a college community (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Specifically, physical and attitudinal barriers make strong self-advocacy skills "essential" for the student with a disability (McCarthy, 2007). Power Soccer created an environment in which students who use power wheelchairs directly engaged these skills.

### **Stronger Friendships and Social Interactions**

Participation in a Power Soccer program facilitated the participants' development of strong friendships and healthy social interactions. Students who use power wheelchairs and do not have the opportunity to get involved in this activity are much less likely to experience the same quality of social interactions. For many students who use power wheelchairs, involvement in Power Soccer also provides them with their first opportunity to form close friendships with other peers who share similar physical disabilities. For the students involved, this outcome significantly contributed to creating a positive college experience that was also extremely important to them on a personal level.

One's social interactions and relationships will always be impacted by the social role he/she occupies (Wolfensberger, 1983, 2000). Especially within the context of competitive athletic activities, many participants begin college without experiencing the benefits of occupying positively-valued social roles. Involvement in Power Soccer provided these individuals with their first opportunity to occupy such a role. As a result, these students not only increased the value they placed on their own social roles as athletes, but also the value they placed on the roles of other physically disabled peers who were involved in the Power Soccer program. The resulting reciprocal positive values these students placed on each other drastically improved their social interactions and relationships. This was indicated by the findings in which students overwhelmingly cited their improved friendships as reasons why they encouraged other students to join the team.

To establish a healthy identity, it is important for college students to develop mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As students experience separation from parents and family, they must learn to build a healthy interdependence on their peers before they are able to achieve a fully realized identity. The students in this study found the camaraderie within their Power Soccer team to be an effective catalyst for achieving this interdependence.

Similarly, Tinto (1988, 1993) identified healthy social interactions as an important element of a student's successful transition into the college community. In fact, the success of an individual's transition into a college community is marked by the strength of the relationships they form with others in the community. Considering this, it is important to note that students in this study unanimously reported strong friendships as a significant benefit to participation in Power Soccer.

The findings of this study supported previous research concerning the social impact of athletic involvement. Participation in collegiate-level athletics results in a perceived higher level of social support for athletes throughout the college campus (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). This level of social support is markedly higher than the level of support perceived by non-athletes on the same campuses, and participants in this study echoed these conclusions. Previous research has also suggested that participation in athletic teams typically results in the formation of an athletic subculture within the college campus (Astin, 1977). This subculture was marked by a pronounced social divide between the athletes and other students who were not involved. Each of these conclusions was supported by these findings, as every one of the nine students interviewed specifically identified social support as a positive benefit of participation in Power Soccer.

Students with physical disabilities need the same kind of social support and integration as any other student on-campus. Goodwin et al. (2009) reported that athletes who are disabled often share a sense of community and are emotionally connected to one another. However, opportunities for these students to establish this support are limited, simply because there are typically fewer organized activities that implement the use of power wheelchairs on college campuses. This distinction places an even higher emphasis on providing students who use power wheelchairs with the opportunity to engage in a Power Soccer program. Ideally, such a program should be supported and publicized by both student affairs and athletic departments. Administrators who work with these students on a consistent basis, including those who work in housing offices or disabled student services, should also be aware of the social benefits students gain from this participation.

### **Improved Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

Certain elements of Power Soccer, particularly the competitive action and teamwork required of participants, provided students with the opportunity to improve their communication and interpersonal skills. As students recognized their improvements in these areas, their self-confidence became significantly higher. In the interest of fostering the development of a positive self-image for students who use power wheelchairs, educators should actively encourage their participation and involvement in a Power Soccer program.

The higher confidence levels and stronger social networks of Power Soccer participants are evidence of upward movement through the social classes identified by social role valorization theory (Wolfensberger, 1983, 2000). As teammates, the participants learned to value each other's social roles in more positive ways. The chance to independently participate and compete in an organized sport provided them with the confidence to compare their own social roles with those of able-bodied students, thereby improving how they valued each other as students with physical disabilities. Furthermore, for college students, interpersonal competencies must be established before it is possible to then develop mature friendships and relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As these competencies are discovered and confidence is built within these skills, students are then able to build a healthy level of interdependence within their college community and foster their own capacity for intimacy in their relationships. Each of these steps forms a foundational piece of achieving integrity, identity, and purpose.

It is vitally important for college students who use power wheelchairs to be given the opportunity to explore and establish their own self-confidence, especially considering the tendencies of their able-bodied peers to place negative social values on them. Improved group interaction and communication can be an outcome of wheelchair sports (Campbell & Jones, 2002). The communication, teamwork, and competition required of Power Soccer participants provides the strongest, and possibly only, opportunity to develop this self-confidence that such students are likely to find. For college administrators wishing to foster a more conducive, accessible, and welcoming university culture for students with physical disabilities, the positive impacts of participation in a Power Soccer program should not be ignored or understated.

## Limitations

The results of this study were limited to the experiences of nine undergraduate students who used power wheelchairs while enrolled at State College during the spring semester of 2010. As with any qualitative research, readers should not generalize the findings of this study to other institutions. The study provides information on the experiences of physically disabled students who used power wheelchairs to participate in a recreational Power Soccer team at one institution. Conclusions drawn from the study do not necessarily apply to other colleges or universities. The experiences of these students were self-reported. The absence of how other individuals on campus viewed the outcomes of students with disabilities on the Power Soccer team was not a part of this study's design.

## Implications for Disability Services Providers

Since there is a paucity of sport opportunities for students with physical disabilities on campuses, the growth of Power Soccer provides students the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of participating on an athletic team. While there is no clear model for which campus unit should house and support a Power Soccer team, the following experiences of the institution studied in this research can be instructive for disability services providers interested in offering a similar sport opportunity at their institutions.

This institution's involvement with Power Soccer began when teams from a neighboring community were invited to campus to perform a demonstration. The Disability Services office, the Recreation Services office, and faculty from the Adapted Physical Education academic program collaborated on this opportunity to promote the demonstration, find appropriate space, and to cover the minimal costs involved. Following the demonstration, it was apparent that students were interested in exploring the potential for hosting a Power Soccer team at the institution. Students contacted the sport's governing body, Power Soccer USA (<http://www.powersoccerusa.net/>), to explore the logistics of doing so. A student club was then formed, following the university's policies and procedures for forming an athletic club. When this was accomplished, the club formally affiliated itself with Power Soccer USA. Power Soccer USA provided some funding and resources to the club and worked with it in arranging travel and transportation. The Disability Services director at the

university served as an advisor to the club and assisted it in raising funds to support the club's activities. Partnerships with other campus entities such as Recreation Services, Adapted Physical Education, and Athletics resulted in some additional funds, resources, and space for the team. Additionally, the University's Development office assisted in seeking out alumni who were interested in sponsoring the club.

The success of the team has served as a helpful recruitment tool as several students who use power wheelchairs have attended the university specifically to play Power Soccer. As students who formed the original club graduated, new students assumed leadership roles within the club. These new students, along with additional funding sources garnered through the attention the team received, provided the means to sustain the Power Soccer club at this university.

The opportunity for students with disabilities to participate in an intercollegiate athletic club provides many benefits to participating students: higher levels of social interactions and independence, the opportunity to compete and participate on a team, and an increased amount of self-confidence. Disability Services staff members can help create these opportunities by serving as advisors for the sport team and facilitate planning among other campus offices that can contribute to the creation and success of the team. In this capacity, campus offices, beginning with Disability Services, can promote student engagement, personal development, and higher retention rates of an important segment of postsecondary populations during their transition to independence in adulthood.

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