



An Examination of College Adaptive Sport Sponsorship and the Role of Cause-Related Marketing

Nina Siegfried

University of Louisville

Ehren R. Green

University of Louisville

Nicholas Swim

University of Louisville

Anthony Montanaro

University of Louisville

Chris Greenwell

University of Louisville

Evan L. Frederick

University of Louisville

Despite the growth of college sports as a whole, college adaptive sport programs are still relatively scarce. Even more scarce are the resource college adaptive sport programs receive from their institutions and athletic departments, making sponsorship funding essential for operation. Using a Delphi approach, this study examined the unique attributes college adaptive sports possess to identify how these programs are acquiring sponsors. First, ten interviews with college adaptive sport professional were conducted to identify key categories regarding unique program characteristics, sponsorship acquisition, and barriers, followed by a survey in which eleven participants ranked the importance of each category. Findings show college adaptive sports unique characteristics include serving an underserved population, impacting the disability community, and positively impacting the lives of student-athletes beyond college, which are attractive to sponsors looking to engage in CRM. Existing network channels and community relationships are key to sponsorship acquisition, as well as, providing tangible deliverables for sponsors looking to quantify their engagement. The results provide strategies for current and future college adaptive sport programs to acquire their own funding through sponsorship, in order to supplement scarce university and athletic department funding.

Historically, disability sport on college campuses has received little support in their fight for inclusion. For example, the recent uptick of financial support for Esports has far-outweighed any contribution given to adaptive sport programs, highlighting the willingness of colleges and athletic departments to invest in new opportunities, just not adaptive sports (McGinniss et al., 2020). Currently, the NCAA supports 1,113 member institutions, providing athletic opportunities to nearly half a million student-athletes (NCAA, 2020). However, fewer than 0.5% of NCAA member institutions offer at least one adaptive sport (ACSAA, 2020a), even though over 19% of the post-secondary student body reports a disability (NCES, 2019) with 9.3% reporting having a physical or mobility disability (NCES, 2014).

The growth of adaptive sport in the collegiate setting is dependent on external funding such as sponsorship (Cottingham et al., 2017; Larkin et al., 2014). Sponsorships are vital to the sustainability of college adaptive sport programs as they are often club sports not housed within the athletic department and not receiving athletic department funding (Larkin et al., 2014). Sponsorship has already proven to be an essential revenue source for adaptive sports such as wheelchair rugby where sponsorship provides the majority of funding for these programs (Cottingham et al., 2017). Similarly, Larkin et al. (2014) deemed sponsorship a key factor in the development of wheelchair basketball as an NCAA emerging sport. While college adaptive sport programs are dependent on external funding for operation, and sponsorship revenues can meet that demand (Cottingham et al., 2017; Larkin et al., 2014; Lough & Irwin, 2001), adaptive sport administrators are often not trained in sponsorship acquisition, creating a need to understand how the unique nature of these sports can be leveraged to gain sponsors. The issue of sport promotion and sponsorship acquisition not only applies to college adaptive sport but is universal. Brooke and Khoo (2021) found funding challenges by Paralympic athletes in Singapore and Malaysia and specifically called for businesses to increase their investment in Paralympic sports to create sustainability for the Paralympic movement. In Latin America, wheelchair sports faced similar issues and study participants outed their frustration about their struggle to attract sponsors (Cottingham et al., 2015).

Disability sport provides sponsors with unique opportunities to meet traditional and new media consumption patterns and engage youth (Legg & Dottori, 2017). Specifically, the unique landscape of disability sport offers sponsors opportunities to meet corporate objectives not traditionally served in mainstream sports and engage with socially responsible organizations through cause-related marketing (CRM; Das et al., 2020). The movement for organizations to engage in CRM practices has grown rapidly over the past 20 years, with organizations identifying the extraordinary benefits of aligning their sponsorship/marketing investments with socially responsible organizations such as adaptive sport organizations (Das et al., 2020).

With effective sponsorship programs, college adaptive sport programs can become financially self-sustaining, increase their marketability, and bring awareness to intercollegiate opportunities for future adaptive sport athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the unique attributes college adaptive sports possess to identify how these programs acquire sponsors. Further, the study examines the current methods used by college adaptive sport programs to connect with potential sponsors, sponsorship inventory used in sponsorships, college adaptive sports' specific (funding) needs, and barriers faced in sponsorship acquisition. This study fills a gap in research by examining the intersection of sponsorship objectives, CRM, and college adaptive sport in the United States in order to determine how the unique characteristics

of college adaptive sport can be leveraged to increase funding through strategic sponsorships. Findings of this research should aid adaptive sport administrators in developing effective sponsorship programs.

Literature Review

Adaptive Sport

The development of adaptive sport in intercollegiate athletics began in 1970. The first sport introduced was wheelchair basketball and, under the direction of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA), the first championship was hosted in 1977 (Missouri Rec., n.d.). The NWBA still up to this day is the national governing organization of wheelchair basketball at all levels, including junior, adult, and collegiate as well as responsible for hosting the respective national tournaments (NWBA, 2021). Since 1977, the growth of adaptive sport on college campuses across the country has been slow. However, in 2009, with the development of the American Collegiate Society for Adapted Athletics (ACSAA), there has been an increase in adaptive sport programs and an increase in the diversity of sport offerings. As of 2020, 23 schools offered at least one version of adaptive sport, with offerings ranging from wheelchair tennis, quad rugby, track and road racing, power soccer, powerlifting, track and field, swimming, adaptive rowing, adaptive golf, cycling, fitness, table tennis, to bocce (ACSAA, 2020b).

Schools adopting college level adaptive sport programming to their campuses also experience significant internal and external benefits (Ruddell, 2018). The internal benefits of adaptive sport for institutions can be seen through aligning research and application, as schools with strong robotics, exercise and wellness, kinesiology, and therapeutic recreation may gain valuable participants for research studies. Additionally, higher education institutions are driven by their mission statements. Wilson et al. (2012) found 75% of institutions referenced diversity in their mission statement. As disability is regarded as part of institutional diversity (Aquino, 2016) schools can address and support institutional diversity by offering sport opportunities to students with disabilities. The external benefits of adaptive sport lie in the ability of universities to secure funding opportunities through grants related to disability sport and research (Ruddell, 2018). Similarly, Ackerman and Fay (2016) discussed additional external benefits, as adaptive sport programming has the potential to assist in the careers of future Paralympic-eligible athletes. In fact, during the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games, over 40 percent of Team USA athletes had competed at the college level (Team USA, 2021). Thus, college adaptive sport programming can potentially become a sustainable pipeline for athletes to attain their goals of competing at future Paralympic Games (Ackerman & Fay, 2016).

The increase in research funding and Paralympic participation are two external benefits of adaptive sport programming. Another potential external benefit for universities is the financial gain from securing new sponsorships for their adaptive sport programs. As Hansen (2019) contends, the generation of sponsorship revenue from adaptive sport may be attainable to help fund sport programming. In these adaptive sport programs, a five-step process has been proposed to apply, develop, and implement sponsorship (Hansen, 2019). These steps include auditing assets, assembling a sponsorship package, value of selling the sponsorship, activation of sponsorship, and retention of sponsorship. While these steps are traditional tactics used in sponsorship acquisition and retention, Hansen (2019) highlighted some unique characteristics of adaptive sport programs impacting the traditional sponsorship acquisition process, such as the

community involvement and the ability to emotionally impact a sponsor's target customers. However, further insight is needed to understand the unique characteristics of adaptive sport programs, specifically intercollegiate programs, and how potential sponsorship procurement might differ from traditional university athletic and campus recreation departments.

Sponsorship Objectives

Sponsorship relationships are built on objectives that ultimately meet the needs of both parties (Renard & Sitz, 2011). Sponsorship objectives support the corporate and sport entity's missions and are specific and measurable goals to be accomplished in the sponsorship relationship (Cornwell, 2020). Originally, sponsorships were a pure monetary transaction in exchange for a name or brand exposure (Renard & Sitz, 2011). Recently, sponsors have shifted their sponsorship objectives to a value match between a sport, event, team, or individual athlete, and a sponsor (Cottingham & Petersen-Wagner, 2018). Companies have turned away from short-term transactions and marketing communication tactics in exchange for strategic, value-creating, long-term relationships (Renard & Sitz, 2011; Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007).

While the cluttered sponsorship landscape is forcing companies to find reasons not to sponsor a sport property (Lefton, 2014), niche sports such as adaptive sports, offer potential partners an escape from sponsorship clutter and saturation (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013b, 2013a). Specifically, Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2013b) found that sponsorship objectives for niche sport sponsors differ from mainstream sports, as a greater focus was placed on increasing awareness within a specific target market, image enhancement, and community involvement in niche sports than in mainstream sports. The uniqueness of niche sports provides flexibility in sponsor proposals, an ability to provide category/industry exclusivity to sponsors, and can attract and serve sponsoring entities and their objectives (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013b, 2013a).

To meet sponsorship objectives, the sport property must first identify characteristics of their organization, which may be congruent with potential partners (Meenaghan, 1991). Congruent characteristics in the sponsor-sport property relationship have the power to increase the sponsor's willingness to partner with the sport property as congruency can achieve sponsorship objectives, influence sponsorship motives, as well as influence consumer preference for the sponsor (Cornwell et al., 2006; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Meenaghan, 1991). Second, the sport property must identify intangible and tangible assets which may be of value to sponsors and which can attract and retain sponsors (Cousens et al., 2006). Sport organizations can ease their selection of the intangible and tangible assets they serve to a potential partner by being aware of their own organizational strategy, structure, culture, and politics, and identifying the aspects of the organization that attract potential partners (Cousens et al., 2006).

Looking at sponsorship in the disability sport sector, Macdougall et al. (2014) found that a value match between the sponsor and sport property had a positive effect on sponsorship acquisition by serving sponsorship objectives. Moreover, within individual sponsorship relationships, value congruence heavily influenced sponsorship selection. In their study, mission and philosophy alignment was found to be most important to organizations looking to sponsor. Further, to serve the sponsorship objectives of corporate sponsors, disability sport organizations and athletes need to identify what they have to offer prospective sponsors (i.e., their sponsorship inventory) (Cousens et al., 2006).

Corporate Social Responsibility and Cause-Related Marketing

Corporate social responsibility has increasingly become important in sponsorship decision making (Scheinbaum et al., 2017). As a result, organizations are seeing more value in cause-related marketing (CRM), or marketing activities where businesses partner with a good cause for mutual benefit (Choi et al., 2018). Considering the nature of college adaptive sport programs, cause-related marketing stands out as one way college adaptive sport programs can leverage their assets to increase sponsorship opportunities. The advantage of CRM is that businesses can promote themselves while also associating with a good cause (Thomas et al., 2020).

Prior research has illustrated that consumers respond positively to companies who utilize a CRM strategy. In an examination of the partnership between FedEx, St. Jude's Children's Hospital, and the Professional Golf Association (PGA), Irwin et al. (2003) found that consumers believed CRM to be a positive and vital component of an organization's endeavors. Furthermore, Das et al. (2020) found empirical evidence that CRM does have a positive economic impact on the sponsoring companies. Specifically, Das et al. (2020) found companies including a special product/offer (i.e., commemorative t-shirt) or an additional monetary commitment by the company (i.e., will make an additional donation to the cause for each purchase), have a higher economic return. However, for CRM to be effective, value congruency between the sponsoring agency and the consumer is important. O'Reilly et al. (2018) found that consumers value title sponsors whose values align with their personal values. Furthermore, trust increases between the title sponsor and the consumers when value congruency is present (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

In general, CRM research has looked at servicing CSR objectives by associating with a good cause. Considering the inherent nature of adaptive sports servicing an underserved population, this research study explores the CRM application regarding sponsorship and college adaptive sports. Given the need for collegiate adaptive sports to secure sponsorships to thrive, it is important to understand what they have to offer in order to meet the needs of prospective sponsoring agencies. While the prior literature has explored sponsorship objectives as a whole and objectives important for niche sport sponsorships, intercollegiate adaptive sports provide a unique context with particular characteristics. Therefore, it is important to identify which objectives intercollegiate adaptive sports program can fulfil. The first research question asks:

RQ 1: What characteristics of adaptive sport can be leveraged by college adaptive sport programs to attract sponsors?

Beyond identifying pertinent sponsorship objectives, it is also important to identify how adaptive sports acquire sponsors and manage their sponsorships. Considering the lack of staff and support often assigned to these programs, insight into the methods used to connect with sponsors, the inventory used in sponsorship activations, and how the funding is utilized can aid current and future programs in their sponsorship efforts. Further, examining the barriers faced can assist in identifying ways to increase sponsorship acquisition effectiveness. Therefore, the following research questions are presented:

RQ 2: What methods are used by college adaptive sport programs to connect with potential sponsors?

RQ 3: What sponsorship inventory is used in sponsorship acquisition by college adaptive sport programs?

RQ 4: What barriers are faced by college adaptive sport programs in sponsorship acquisition?

Method

This study utilized a Delphi approach to examine college adaptive sport sponsorship acquisition. The purpose of the Delphi approach is to improve data collection, generate ideas, and establish consensus on issues (Young & Jamieson, 2001). Given the dearth of research in this area, the Delphi approach provides a generalizable, in-depth perspective from participants. Within the Delphi technique, experts on the topic are recruited and they participate in a differing number of rounds of data collection to facilitate group opinion or judgement, which is representative of the consensus of opinion of participants. Questionnaires play a key role in incorporating feedback and/or opinions of all participants as they statistically summarize group views (Goodman, 1987).

For this study, the Delphi approach utilized two phases. Phase one consisted of semi-structured interviews from experts in the field to understand the participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were selected instead of focus groups to avoid potential group think or influence from other experts (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Phase two consisted of the development of a survey instrument based on the categories identified during phase one. Employing Likert scales to identify group consensus around the individual ideas discovered during phase one is a common practice in the Delphi approach (Goodman, 1987). While the Delphi approach has not been utilized abundantly in sport management literature, it is widely used and considered an acceptable method for gathering data that requires participants to be experts within a given field (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). As this study focuses on sport administrative tasks, particularly sponsorship acquisition, individuals currently holding roles which include such tasks were included in the study.

Phase One

Sample. The sample consisted of professionals in college adaptive sport programs, both recreational and competitive. Internet searches were conducted to identify college adaptive sport professionals, specifically focusing on those with either a director level title or head coaching title to meet the expert requirement of the Delphi approach. For example, individuals identified for inclusion in this study included titles as Head Coach/Assistant Director of Campus Recreation of Adaptive Sports and Program Director. Our search identified a total of 22 institutions as of September 2020 that had active college adaptive sport programs, and who via the institution's websites, included contacts for their college adaptive sports program. Snowball sampling was also utilized, as participants were asked if they knew of other college adaptive sport professionals who might meet the inclusion criteria (i.e., responsible for administration of their respective college adaptive sport program) for this study. Initial emails were sent out to the 22 college adaptive sport program professionals identified. Follow-up emails were sent out two weeks after the initial email to any non-respondents. In total, ten college adaptive sport program professionals agreed to participate ($n = 8$ from the email request, $n = 2$ from referrals). Six

participants were male (60%) and four were female (40%). Participants' job titles varied, but some examples included, Program Director, Head Coach, and Inclusive Rec and Fitness Center Coordinator. Eight out of the ten programs offered wheelchair basketball, five programs offered track and field for adaptive athletes, four offered wheelchair tennis, and golf, rugby, para-equestrian, swimming, goalball, and adaptive climbing were offered by one program each.

Interview Procedure. Phase one's goal was to allow participants to share their personal experiences with sponsorship acquisition. Thus, it was determined that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate method to ascertain the opinions of the practitioners (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Overall, researchers completed ten semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, and interviews averaged 45-60 minutes in length. Pseudonyms were given to participants for confidentiality purposes throughout the study.

The interview guide followed a two-step protocol. All researchers conducting field work were provided with the same interview protocol for reliability purposes (Miles et al., 2020). Additionally, all participants gave verbal informed consent before starting the interview. The first part of the protocol included demographic questions and inquired whether the individuals were responsible for sponsorships for their adaptive sports program. A participant's response to the "responsible for sponsorship" question (yes/no) dictated the second part of the protocol, with minimal difference. If they answered "yes" they were asked what they were currently doing. Those who answered "no" were asked what they *would* be doing (hypothetical, e.g., Based on your role, what assets do you think the program could leverage to attract sponsors?). All interview questions in the second part of the protocol were guided by the research questions. Some example questions were, "what facets of your collegiate adaptive sports program do you use to attract sponsors?" and "what industries do you look to partner with for your sponsorships with your collegiate adaptive sports programs?" In total, the protocol included 15 questions. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, some participants received follow-up questions from the researchers.

Data Analysis. The qualitative responses from phase one (i.e., interviews) were transcribed verbatim by the transcription software Otter.ai and checked for consistency. Following this, the interviews were first coded by two of the researchers. The first coding cycle involved In Vivo coding, using words directly from the participants themselves from the transcriptions. Since the research area being studied is still novel, this coding scheme allowed us to prioritize the participants' voices and include terminology specific to the adaptive sports culture (Miles et al., 2020). Miles et al. (2020) noted "Definitions become sharper when two researchers code the same data set and discuss their initial difficulties" (p. 146). Therefore, two researchers independently coded the same two interviews during the first cycle of coding. To ensure consistency and provide structure and unity in the code list, discussions amongst coders occurred until a consensus was reached on key codes. This process of team coding drives clarity of definitions and serves as a reliability check (Miles et al., 2020). The second cycle of coding focused on developing pattern codes based on the initial operative coding scheme, a common practice to group first cycle codes into larger units (Miles et al., 2020). For reliability purposes the researchers met and discussed the pattern codes and applied the final pattern codes to all interviews. During this process, the researchers allowed for new pattern codes to emerge. Based on the second cycle coding, condensing the pattern codes, categories for each of the research questions were identified (Miles et al., 2020). Data saturation was reached as no new information

was found in the last interview. The categories stemming from the interviews were then utilized for phase two of the study. For example, RQ1, “What are the unique characteristics of college adaptive sports that can be leveraged by programs to attract sponsors?” categories included, “associate with a disability friendly network,” “contribute to social justice,” and “diversify sponsorship portfolio.”

Phase Two

Sample. The same 22 professionals identified in phase one and the two individuals from snowball sampling were contacted to participate in phase two of the study. Eleven participants ($n = 11$) completed the quantitative questionnaire. The demographics portion of the survey revealed participants were employed in their current position in the adaptive sport program for a range of 1 to 12 years ($M = 5.5$). Participants also indicated the number of athletes within their collegiate adaptive programs ranged from 2 to 100 ($M = 26.82$), and the reported yearly budgets per program ranged from \$0.00 to \$500,000 ($M = \$121,000$). Furthermore, the adaptive sport programs within this study were housed in one of four departments within their respective universities, including student life (disability services), campus recreation, intercollegiate athletics, or a specific academic unit such as Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management.

Instrument and Procedure. For phase two, a questionnaire was designed based on the themes identified in phase one. The questionnaire included five questions of which four were relevant to this study and directly aligned with the research questions. Potential responses for each question were derived from the themes generated from the interviews in phase one. Participants were asked to rate each based on level of frequency for their respective program on a one-to-seven-point Likert scale. For instance, for research question one, participants rated themes like “contribute to social justice” and “impact the disability community” based on frequency of emphasis for their respective program. For research questions one, two, and four, respondents ranked responses from “Never,” to “Always”. For research question three, respondents ranked responses from “Not at all important,” to “Extremely important.” Participants were also given the ability to provide any other key components of the sponsorship acquisition process through open-ended questions included as an option for each question.

Similar to phase one, participants were sent an email with a link to the newly developed questionnaire. Two-weeks from the first email, a follow-up email was sent. In total, 11 (response rate 45.8%) college adaptive sport professionals completed the survey. It is important to note that if participants did not interview in phase one, they were not excluded from participation in phase two, as a consistent number of participants across each phase is not a requirement for the Delphi approach (Staggers et al., 2002; Ager et al., 2010).

Data Analysis. Descriptive statistics (e.g., means and standard deviations) were examined for each research question. The scholarly examination of disability sport is in the nascent stage (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). Therefore, we employed an exploratory approach to gain a better understanding of the processes involved in college adaptive sport sponsorship acquisition.

Results

The Delphi approach allows for an in-depth analysis of participants' perceptions. This study followed a two-phase approach, and thus, the results from both phases will be explored. In the phase one (interviews), the information was coded to align with the research questions. The phase two questionnaire was distributed to allow participants to rate their level of agreement with the original categories from phase one. The results are organized by the order of the research questions, which aligns with how the survey questions were structured.

RQ1: What Characteristics of Adaptive Sports can be Leveraged by College Adaptive Sport Programs to Attract Sponsors?

Interview Findings. Participants were asked how they might use characteristics of their program to attract potential sponsors. In total, participants identified ten distinct ways to leverage their characteristics to sponsors. The most identified category was to *serve an under-served population* (8/10). An example for this was from Katarina, who stated, "We're going to provide this behemoth of athletics to every other student, we should have something available to students with disabilities, even if it's only a few people." The next highest identified category was *student-athletes' life success and personal independence* (5/10), which was exemplified by statements such as "Giving students, their life after school" (Ashley) and "Better the lives of student-athletes with disabilities" (Lauren). *Associate with the disability community* (5/10), was reflected by Steven mentioning, "We have a giant community of disabled athletes from different, you know, it allows for diversity within our culture." The next two categories that emerged were *engage with the outside community* (4/10), represented by "We also do a charity give back and where we play a game of wheelchair basketball for a different charity ..." (Steven) and *opportunity to prepare student-athletes for careers* (4/10) represented by, "Brought in different employers to do webinars on employment, right, my idea wasn't to, you know, for them to all offer our (university name) students with disabilities jobs but I wanted mentorships I wanted shadows, I wanted that you know that baseline information" (John). The other categories that emerged, which were also included in the phase-two survey were: *associate with program legacy* (3/10), *integrate with general student population* (3/10), *share compelling stories* (3/10), *impact the disability community* (2/10), *associate with program brand* (2/10), and *provide health and wellness to student-athletes* (1/10).

Survey Results. Categories with the highest mean scores in this phase were both *impact the disability community* ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 0.809$) and *serve an under-served population* ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.758$). Results also indicated high mean scores across all sub-themes, indicating the participants agreed positively with the identified sub-themes. Other sub-themes with high mean scores were *share compelling stories* ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 0.905$) and *set student-athletes up for life success and personal independence* ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.679$). For full results, see Table 1.

RQ2: What are the Methods Used by College Adaptive Sport Programs to Connect with Potential Sponsors?

Interview Findings. Aligning with the second research question, participants were asked about their sponsorship outreach experiences with their adaptive sport programs. Participants

discussed six modes of potential sponsorship acquisition, with *network* (9/10) and *continuous business relationships* (6/10) being identified most frequently. For example, the *network* category was used when participant John stated, “I think you are only as good as your network in development.” Furthermore, the following responses fell under the *continuous business relationships* category: “Through an evolution of the sponsorship that was here when I came here with ABC medical; I try to work with companies that we already work with” (Carl) as well as “So, the owner, the CEO of this company, he was a supporter of the university when he came to (university name) and has been a support since the 80s” (Tanner). The other four sponsorship acquisition modes identified and selected for phase-two were *community partners* (3/10), *referrals* (2/10), and *partnerships with sport organizations* (1/10).

Survey Results. In the second phase of this study, respondents of the survey indicated their frequency of use of the different modes of sponsorship acquisition. The three categories that emerged with the most frequent usage amongst participants were *community partners* ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.079$), *continuous business relationships* ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.265$), and *network* ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.789$). For full results, see Table 2.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Adaptive Sport Characteristics that can be Leveraged to Attract Sponsors

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Impact the disability community	6.36	0.809
Serve an under-served population	5.91	1.758
Set student athletes up for life success and personal independence	5.73	1.679
Share compelling stories	5.73	0.905
Provide health and wellness to student athletes	5.36	1.963
Associate with disability friendly community	5.27	1.794
Engage with the outside community	5.27	2.054
Associate with program brand	5.18	1.401
Associate with program legacy	5.09	1.758
Opportunity to prepare student athletes for careers	4.91	2.071
Integrate with general student population	4.82	1.940
Contribute to social justice	4.73	1.679
Affiliate with research and training programs	4.55	1.214
Diversify sponsorship portfolio	4.45	1.968

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Methods used to Connect with Potential Sponsors

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Community partners	5.18	1.079
Continuous business relationships	5.00	1.265
Network	5.00	1.789
Referrals	4.45	1.572
Partnerships with sport organizations	3.45	2.252
Cold calls	3.36	2.014

RQ3: What Sponsorship Inventory is Used in Sponsorship Acquisition by College Adaptive Sport Programs?

Interview Findings. To address research question three, participants were asked how their adaptive sport programs envisioned/executed sponsorship offerings. The participants responses were categorized into eight separate potential sponsorship offerings with *social media posts* (6/10) and *banners and signage* (6/10) being the most frequently identified. Some examples for the responses categorized as *social media posts* were “I think probably the biggest deliverable you have is social media involvement” (John) and “So we were the first university to livestream all of our games.... put a lot of material online either through our moving mass TV channel or our social media like Facebook, or our YouTube channel” (Carl). In regard to *banners and signage*, John also mentioned using “Signs on different campuses.” Other responses categorized under sponsorship offerings, which were included in the phase-two survey were: *scholarships* (2/10), *access to data* (2/10), *tournament sponsorship* (2/10), *camp sponsorship* (2/10), *public address announcements* (1/10), and *product endorsement* (1/10).

Survey Results. In phase two, the above-mentioned categories were presented to the participants so that they could rate their frequency of use for the different sponsorship offerings. The two highest means were *social media posts* ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.120$) and *banners and signage* ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.982$). For full results, see Table 3.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Sponsorship Inventory used by Adaptive Sport Programs

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social media posts	5.64	1.120
Banners and signage	5.18	0.982
Tournament sponsorship	4.73	1.348
Camp sponsorship	4.45	1.695
Public address announcements	3.82	2.183
Product endorsement	3.73	1.954
Scholarships	3.45	2.162
Access to data	2.91	1.814

RQ4: What Barriers are Faced by College Adaptive Sport Programs in Sponsorship Acquisition?

Interview Findings. In total, seven potential barriers were identified in phase one. *University bureaucracy* (7/10) was the most often identified. Participants described *university bureaucracy* as “We do need to, obviously, you need to kind of follow University guidelines” (Lauren) and “You know we have a procurement process; nothing gets done quickly. Even if it's right. And even if everybody's in agreement, it takes too dang long” (John). Lack of sponsorship expertise (4/10) was identified by participants such as Katarina who said “I'm not sure if we're supposed to sign contracts. This is how much I don't know about this type of stuff, right?” The other categories identified in this study, which were utilized in the survey in phase-two survey

were *lack of organizational community* (2/10), *lack of program visibility* (1/10), *small disability student population* (1/10), *lack of staff* (1/10), and *organizational turnover* (1/10).

Survey Results. Results from the phase-two survey indicated that *university bureaucracy* ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.844$) was the largest barrier, followed by *lack of program visibility* ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.328$) and *small disability student population* ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.601$). For full results, see Table 4.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for Barriers to Sponsorship Acquisition

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
University bureaucracy	5.00	1.844
Lack of program visibility	4.82	1.328
Small disability student population	4.82	1.601
Lack of staff	4.45	1.753
Lack of sponsorship expertise	4.00	1.673
Organizational turnover	3.64	2.157
Lack of organizational communication	3.45	2.018

Discussion

This study's purpose was to examine how the unique characteristics of college adaptive sport can be leveraged to increase funding through strategic sponsorships. College adaptive sport programs provide physical, social, and cognitive opportunities for the disability community, which is a community that is currently underserved. College adaptive sport programs have both tangible and intangible assets that are mutually beneficial to the program and the sponsoring organization, thereby providing funding opportunities to sustain college adaptive sport programs.

Characteristics Attractive to Sponsors

Overall, fourteen reasons were identified for why companies sponsor college adaptive sport programs. The most important finding from this list was that the seven highest rated reasons could all be connected to CRM objectives. Specifically, findings highlighted the value of impacting the disability community and serving an underserved population, which college adaptive programs can uniquely leverage in sponsorship acquisition. Compelling program and athlete stories further support the communication of these unique characteristics and provide another asset for programs to attract sponsors. Additionally, findings indicated the social impact of the programs goes beyond college as programs set student-athletes up for life success and personal independence. To effectively leverage these unique characteristics, college adaptive sport programs can and should highlight CRM marketing strategies when seeking external funding through sponsorship agreements. For example, by emphasizing and leveraging the intangible nature of serving an underserved population, adaptive sport programs can receive funding or gifts-in-kind (e.g., equipment or apparel) through sponsorship agreements. In turn, the sponsoring organization can publicize their support of an underserved population, which will highlight their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, enhance their image, and increase their

community involvement. Given that promoting and implementing a mutually beneficial relationship via sponsorship has proven to be a successful strategy for both companies and programs (Irwin et al., 2003), college adaptive sport programs should focus on how their program serves an underserved population when looking to acquire outside funding. For example, Carl stated he is selling...

"The fact that [individuals with] disabilities is an underserved population. And that we actually provide scholarships and opportunities for people with disabilities to get a degree and use that degree to become independent. And also, to represent, because as you may know in the United States opportunities for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are really growing and businesses are looking to hire people with disabilities, but they can't hire them if they don't get degrees."

College adaptive sport programs should also emphasize the educational and career opportunities that are created when college adaptive sport programs are available for those in the disability community (Comerford, 2017). Illustrating this notion to sponsoring organizations encourages them to further emphasize their commitment to the community by providing opportunities for the next generation of disability sport participants to earn a college degree and become working members of the community. Research has shown both education and involvement in adaptive sports are associated with a higher likelihood of employment for individuals with disabilities (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2016). Therefore, sponsors of collegiate adaptive sports not only are providing educational opportunities for an underserved population, they are also supporting athletes with disabilities, which is increasing the athletes' quality of life and employment opportunities after their athletic careers.

Additionally, college adaptive sport programs should utilize their athletes' stories when searching for sponsorship agreements. The athletes' stories create a sense of connection with the sponsoring organization, which can be leveraged to enhance the image of the sponsoring organization (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013b).

Sponsorship Inventory for Sponsorship Acquisition

While athletes' stories are an intangible asset of college adaptive sport programs, these programs can leverage the stories in a tangible way for sponsorship acquisition through social media which was found to be the most important inventory offering in sponsorship acquisition. Social media is a free and powerful tool to share athletes' stories as some of the adaptive sport programs noted doing already. The stories can be shared via short clips on platforms like Instagram and Twitter, and/or by creating longer videos to be shared on video sharing platforms like YouTube. Additionally, social media provides co-branding opportunities to sponsors, while also providing the sponsor with an avenue to quantify their reach and engagement to those who look for measures of return-on-investment (ROI). In partnerships with corporate entities, college adaptive sport programs can create meaningful campaigns highlighting how the sponsor is supporting their athletes. When using social media, college adaptive sports programs should encourage sponsors to focus on the athletes' elite sport performance story rather than "supercrip" themes, to gain the student-athlete's support for this strategy (Legg & Dottori, 2017). The supercrip image is a problematic stereotyping process portraying athletes as "overcoming" their disabilities to achieve unlikely "success," which further reinforces low expectations for

individuals with disabilities and defines success as conforming to able-bodied norms (Silva & Howe, 2012). Therefore, reliance on this type of messaging should be avoided.

Barriers Faced in Sponsorship Acquisition

While college adaptive sport programs have many offerings, they are also facing a variety of challenges and barriers. Being a part of college campuses, these programs cannot escape the university bureaucracy which often complicates the sponsorship acquisition and retention process. As noted by Logan in his interview, college adaptive sport managers need to be aware of the politics on college campuses especially when it comes to approaching donors and sponsors. Steven further highlighted college adaptive sport programs face more restrictions compared to external nonprofits and have to adhere to campus-wide strategic plans for fundraising, which require individual departments to receive permission from university personnel to contact or accept external funding. This added layer of approval can delay funding or even eliminate it if the college adaptive sports program does not receive the university's approval. To increase sponsorship funding and program visibility, college adaptive sport programs cannot rely on university relations.

Methods Used to Connect to Sponsors

The finding related to the methods used by college adaptive sport programs to connect with potential sponsors further supports this notion, as programs highlighted community partners, continuous business relationships, and their networks as being the methods most frequently used to connect with potential sponsors. Hence, college adaptive sport programs must make an effort to form their own relationships and leverage their existing networks while being aware of existing university bureaucracies. Therefore, it is essential for college adaptive sport programs to train their staff and or seek support regarding how to foster and maintain relationships with sponsors, acquire sponsorship, and retain sponsors, as current programs were found to often lack sponsorship expertise.

To conclude, college adaptive sports have unique characteristics including serving an underserved population, impacting the disability community, and positively impacting the lives of student-athletes beyond college, which are attractive to sponsors looking to engage in CRM. Potential sponsors are best acquired by looking at the existing network channels of college adaptive sport programs and continuing to form relationships with individuals in the community. For companies looking to maximize their sponsorship's impact, programs can also offer inventory such as social media posts and banners and signage as well as specific funding opportunities for tournament or equipment sponsorships. Following these strategies, current and future college adaptive sport programs have the power acquire their own funding through sponsorship, limiting their dependency on scarce university and athletic department funding.

Practical Implications

Considering the importance of CRM objective in sponsors' decisions to partner with college adaptive sport programs, program managers need to identify organizations with aligned missions and CRM objectives when looking for sponsors. As the results indicated the importance of the personal and program networks to sponsorship acquisition in collegiate adaptive sport,

program managers need to expand and nurture their relations with external individuals and rely on those when acquiring potential sponsors. Once potential sponsors are identified, current and future college adaptive sport managers should focus on the unique characteristics their programs hold to acquire sponsors. Particularly, they should highlight the impact the program has on the on (disability) community, how their program is serving an underserved population, and the social impact their program has on their student athletes lives. Hereby, sharing compelling program and athlete stories is a powerful way to convey the program impact to sponsors. Additionally, the educational and career opportunities created should be pointed out to quantify the impact. Moreover, programs need to produce quantifiable deliverables for sponsors (tangibles, e.g., scholarships) who are looking to measure their investment and its impact. One program which has excelled at doing so, is the University of Arizona Adaptive Athletics program. The Athletic Director specifically put out a video message on social media in which he first highlights the size of the program, including what sports are supported, and underlines the uniqueness of program offerings (e.g., being the only program in the nation to offer adaptive golf, hand cycling, and wheelchair rugby). He then outlines the program impact, focusing on being the largest producer of Paralympians in the United States. Quantifying this statement, he shares the number of athletes coming from the program which participate in Tokyo 2020 (e.g., five current athletes and seven alumni). Outside the athletic accomplishments, the Athletic Director depicts the impact the program has had on the student athletes' lives post-graduation, identifying the programs' alumni have gone on to become doctors, pharmacists, advocates for people with disabilities and worked around the world. Finally, he concludes the video by asking the viewer to become part of the team to create more champions and support the program. He clearly states what the program needs are (e.g., more scholarships and increasing opportunities for students with disabilities to be supported in other sports outside the ones currently offered) and offers the viewer to come meet him, tour the facilities, and learn more about the program (UArizona Adaptive Athletics, 2021). Additionally, the University of Arizona Adaptive Athletics program also highlights stories of student athletes such as wheelchair basketball player Phil Evans who in a video on the program's website describes what wonder means to him at the University of Arizona (Disability Resource Center, 2021). Current and future college adaptive athletic programs should take a similar approach balancing leveraging program and athlete stories with program impact statistics when attracting sponsors.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore the university bureaucracies and how college adaptive sports can best navigate them. Considering the dependency on external relations for sponsorship acquisition and a lack of sponsorship expertise, more insights into how these relationships are sought out and formed is necessary. Additionally, future research should examine insights and practices with regard to how to better train staff and/or hire individuals with sponsorship expertise despite funding constraints and university bureaucracies.

As this study was limited to college adaptive sport administrators only, future research should seek input from athletes and sponsors to gain a more holistic perspective on the college adaptive sport sponsorship environment. Additionally, this study was limited to one cross-section of time. Future studies should address this limitation by taking a longitudinal approach to explore sponsorship acquisition and retention over time. While this study explored various parts of the

sponsorship acquisition process, future studies could explore the individual research questions in more depth.

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