



SO College

Continuing Youth Leadership through Higher Education

Have you ever felt frustrated putting so much effort into cultivating your Project UNIFY youth leaders in middle and high school, only to see them graduate at the peak of their effectiveness? It doesn't have to end there. By introducing your graduating leaders to SO College, you can create a lifetime continuum of commitment to our movement.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SO COLLEGE

SO College is a nationwide network of highly engaged and motivated college students that are working to bring inclusion and acceptance to their college campuses. Created by college students for college students, SO College connects higher education students and individuals with intellectual disabilities from the school or surrounding community. Through sports and leadership opportunities, students build friendships and help lead the social justice movement of Special Olympics. Similar to the overall Special Olympics Project UNIFY® model, SO College activates young leaders in three core areas that mirror Project UNIFY's three core components: youth leadership and advocacy, inclusive sports and whole school engagement.

While Special Olympics Project UNIFY has typically worked with students in elementary, middle and high school, SO College offers an opportunity for engaged young people to continue their leadership efforts and involvement as they enter college. SO College truly serves as a transition program that takes high school youth leaders who have been motivated by their experiences in Project UNIFY and keeps them engaged through their years of higher education while sustaining their commitment to Special Olympics.

SO COLLEGE: A SOLUTION FOR ACTIVATING STUDENTS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

SO College brings value to students and Special Olympics Programs in a variety of ways:

- SO College provides students majoring in a variety of disciplines hands-on opportunities to foster professional growth and build the skills necessary for their future careers – including one with Special Olympics. Through SO College students are able to enhance their leadership, organizational, and planning skills; which are essential aspects of the professional world. SO College also provides a professional development opportunity for students to explore their passion and successfully start a student-lead club.
- SO College helps dedicated high school leaders continue their commitment to Special Olympics and social inclusion at the college level. It is also a great way for state Special Olympics Programs to stay connected with engaged youth, even if they attend college out-of-state.



- SO College chapters often engage individuals from the community who have intellectual disabilities and are not already involved with Special Olympics, but are eager to take part in activities on a college campus. This serves as an excellent opportunity for athlete recruitment.
- SO College builds connections with universities, helping to identify facilities, select and train students as coaches, and involve high-level athletes to create and design sports experiences and trainings for Special Olympics athletes.

Case Studies: The Value of SO College

CAREER BUILDING

"I am studying Chemistry, Physics and Pre-Medical Studies. One day, I aspire to be a surgeon and in order to do that I must be able to adapt to different situations, different environments and different people. By spending time with people with intellectual disabilities, I am honing my skills, which will one day prove to be useful in the medical field."

- Matthew Zielinski, College of Holy Cross Student

Holy Cross University has been able to successfully integrate sports, leadership, and whole school engagement into their SO College program. Every Sunday they host an inclusive sporting event that brings together students and Special Olympics athletes from the surrounding area. These students plan and execute all the events on campus and are constantly looking for new ways to engage more students.

The students that are part of SO College at Holy Cross are able to learn valuable life lessons that will be beneficial as they transition into the professional world. These youth leaders come from all backgrounds and are majoring in many different fields, but SO College has given them professional and leadership skills that will be beneficial – and necessary – for their future careers. SO College has also taught students the value of volunteering and promotes lifelong service to Special Olympics.

CREATING FUTURE SO COLLEGE LEADERS

"My experience working with Boiling Springs High School and helping support their Spread the Word to End the Word® campaign was very inspirational. The high school students I worked with this year will be seniors next year and I have no doubt in my mind that they will continue to participate with the campaign when they go to college and will set an amazing example for those who take over at the high school after they leave."

- Paige Talhelm, Bloomsburg University Student

Students at Bloomsburg University recognized that many local high schools were not participating in the Spread the Word to End the Word campaign, so members of the SO College club at the University decided to bring awareness about the campaign to high schools in their area. Bloomsburg students worked with high school leaders to plan and host Spread the Word Day events that engaged the entire student



population at area high schools. Their work is a great example of how college leaders can mentor younger students and, in turn, create future SO College members. Additionally, in this situation, the SO College members were able to spread the ideals of Project UNIFY to new potential high school leaders and show the connection between Project UNIFY and SO College.

CONTINUING COMMITMENT INTO COLLEGE

“The students coming out of Texas high schools and going to colleges and universities in Texas and neighboring states are motivated by SO College to continue being volunteers, coaches, chaperones and partners. SO College has given them a way to continue their service with Special Olympics”

- Mike Sullivan, Special Olympics Texas Staff Member

Texas has a large number of Youth Activation Committee members who have expressed interest in wanting to stay involved with Special Olympics after high school – SO College is the answer! In Texas, nearly 90% of high school seniors stay within the state to receive higher education. For this reason, SO College in Texas has a valuable opportunity to build partnerships between high schools and colleges that will share many of the same students over the years. Special Olympics Texas is a great example of how SO College can serve as a transition plan for high school students that are looking to stay involved and continue developing their leadership skills in college.

While the majority of Texas seniors stay in-state for college, this is not necessarily the case for students around the rest of the country. For students who choose to attend college outside of their home state, SO College can help facilitate connections with State Program staff members to ensure students feel welcome, engaged and ready to be activated in their new school and state.

IDENTIFYING FUTURE ATHLETES

“The Young Athletes Program for athletes between the ages of 2-7 has been an incredible program for the past two years. SO College at Northwestern University has worked to foster a strong relationship with these families and continues to build these connections in hopes that, once these children are of age, they will participate in various sporting opportunities with Special Olympics.”

- Amy Krischer, Northwestern University Student

Students at Northwestern University work directly with the Young Athletes™ Program to help foster and develop future Special Olympics athletes. In working with Young Athletes, Northwestern University students help the young people feel connected to and included in a supportive and encouraging community. Northwestern University hosts clinics on campus to train Young Athletes in different sports and athletic skills to ensure they are prepared for a future as a Special Olympics athlete.



BUILDING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN A STATE PROGRAM AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

“SO College is a great way for students to either begin or continue their involvement with Special Olympics athletes. It definitely strengthens Special Olympics’ goals of all-inclusivity. Regardless of a student’s major, there are many ways they can help out within the Special Olympics community, or integrate into a school’s existing intramural program. Georgia State University and Georgia Tech, have both held invitational tournaments and started to bring traditional athletes and Unified Partners to state games.”

- Addison Sanford, Special Olympics Georgia Staff Member

Many states get involved with local colleges through state or local games. With stadiums, fields and gymnasiums, colleges have the perfect facilities to host different Special Olympics events. In addition to hosting competitions, many states incorporate university students on the planning committee for these events, adding a much needed youth voice to the conversation. Additionally, SO College can help recruit student volunteers and Fans in the Stands, involving the whole school community in celebrating local Special Olympics athletes. State Programs, like Special Olympics Georgia, have learned that colleges can be their greatest asset and the possibilities are truly endless when it comes to the ways a college campus and student body can benefit the State Program.

Similar to Special Olympics Georgia, the State Program in Utah has benefitted through the connection with local area colleges. As part of Special Olympics Utah, three different universities have formed Unified Sports® teams and compete at the state level. These teams are comprised of students and local area Special Olympics athletes. The students coach and train the athletes and even name their teams after their universities. Each college Unified Sports team competes in at least two state games a year, where they compete against local and college Unified Sports teams. SO College has allowed Special Olympics Utah to build a relationship with each one of these schools and create future Special Olympics volunteers, coaches and financial supporters.

For more information about SO College, visit: www.specialolympics.org/socollege