



Special Olympics Unified Intramural Sports Guide

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Special Olympics
Unified Sports[®]

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Special Olympics and NIRSA Partnership



The partnership between Special Olympics and NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation, promotes social inclusion through shared sports training and competition experiences. Special Olympics Unified Sports® joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team.

It is inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. At the college level, it focuses on building relationships between college students - with and without intellectual disabilities - and local Special Olympics athletes of similar age.

This document will highlight the different ways in which Special Olympics state Programs and campus recreation departments can team up to create Unified Intramural Sports opportunities on campus.



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SECTION 1:

Introduction to Special Olympics College Programs and Special Olympics Unified Sports®



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

Purpose of Intramural Guide & Additional Resources

The Unified Intramural Sports Guide can help college students and administrators create and implement effective, quality Special Olympics Unified Sports® leagues on campus. This resource provides examples and guiding steps to carry out Unified Sports on campus. This guide should be used with other Special Olympics college program resources to meet the needs of the college as it moves toward meaningful inclusion.

[Special Olympics college program page](#)

- Learn about national partner organizations to connect with on your campus and connect with other clubs across the country.

[Special Olympics college program map](#)

- Find out where there are existing college programs across the United States.

[Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® Resources](#)

- Find more information about hosting events, logos and branding, inclusion campaigns, and how to bring Unified Intramural Sports to a college campus.
- Resources include
 - Special Olympics College Program Event Guide
 - Special Olympics College Club Starter Guide
 - Logos and Branding
- [Editable template drive](#)
 - This drive is available for all Special Olympics College Clubs and college programs to use as editable templates. Users can download and edit their own documents to fit their own needs.

[GenerationUnified.org](#)

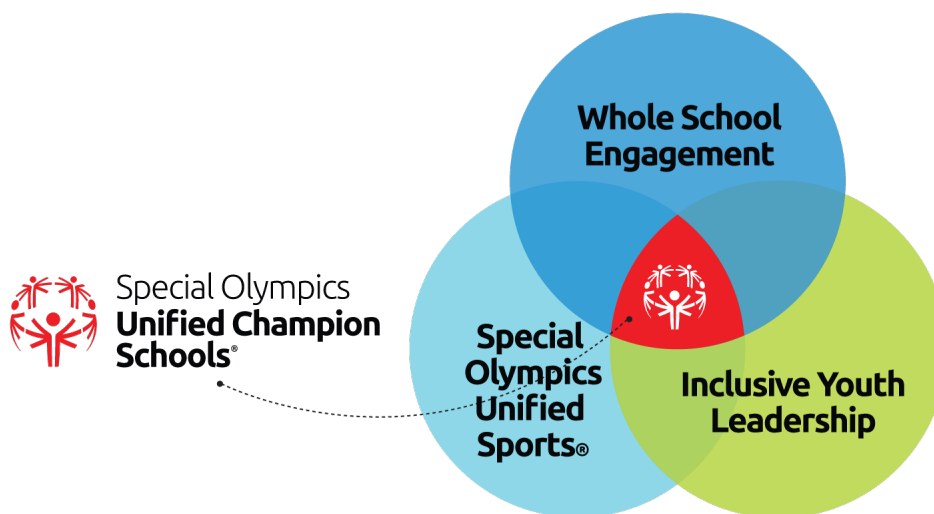
- Stay up to date on the latest stories of youth and students leading the Special Olympics movement toward a world of meaningful inclusion.

For questions regarding the Special Olympics College Club Starter Guide, or any other related college program inquiries, please contact socollege@specialolympics.org.

What Your College Program Can Become

Special Olympics college programming

Special Olympics college programming falls under the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (UCS) umbrella. All U.S. postsecondary institutions (colleges, universities, community colleges, junior colleges, etc.) with Special Olympics college programming, including Special Olympics Unified Sports®, inclusive leadership, and whole campus engagement, are following the Special Olympics UCS model.



Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®

Once your school has achieved one or more of these three main components, your school can become a Unified Champion School in your respective state Program. With sports as the foundation, Unified Champion Schools offers activities that equip young people with tools and training to create climates of acceptance within sports, classrooms, and campus life.

The program is designed to be woven into the fabric of the school, enhancing current efforts and providing rich opportunities that lead to meaningful change in creating a socially inclusive school that supports and engages all learners.

What a Unified Champion School “looks like” can vary greatly from school to school, based on the needs, goals, schedules and other factors unique to each school; but the three basic building blocks remain the same.

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®: The Three Components

Special Olympics Unified Sports®

Special Olympics Unified Sports joins students and Special Olympics athletes on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and inclusion. In the context of a Special Olympics College Club, Unified partners are college students without intellectual disabilities playing with Special Olympics athletes, individuals with an intellectual disability, on an equal playing field.

At many schools, Unified Sports functions as an intramural or club sports on campus. At advanced levels, this becomes tournaments with other local Special Olympics College Clubs.

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership invites students and Special Olympics athletes to fulfill meaningful roles and lead together in their college program.

A Special Olympics College Club functions as an officially registered student-led club on campus, where students meet multiple times a month to plan events. This club includes Special Olympics athletes and college students working collaboratively and as equals. The club works to achieve three the main components of Unified Champion Schools: Unified Sports, Inclusive Leadership, and Whole Campus Engagement.

Whole Campus Engagement

Acceptance and Inclusion Campaigns bring the whole college community together. Pledge signing drives, like Spread the Word >> Inclusion, and rallies for respect can engage the whole student body.

All college students can be fans in the stands at local games, cheering on the team. Whole School Engagement is a great entry point to introduce more students to the Special Olympics movement and encourage participation in the Inclusion Revolution.

Special Olympics National School Recognition Program

After your school has received recognition as a Unified Champion School in your respective state, your club can become a National Unified Champion School. A college or university operating as a Unified Champion School that demonstrates an inclusive campus climate as well as a sense of collaboration, engagement and respect for ALL members of the community, qualifies for national banner recognition.



Special Olympics recognizes these colleges and universities that meet the ten national standards across the three core components.

At the college level, these are the National Standards for banner recognition:

- [College/University Standards](#)

Terms to know

- **athlete:** not capitalized. Person, either a student or from the campus community, with intellectual disability that is a member of the club or competes in Unified Sports on campus. At the college level, athletes should be adults with the ideal age range being 18-34 years old.
- **college:** not capitalized. The term used in this resource for all postsecondary education institutions. Includes colleges, universities, junior colleges and community colleges, amongst others.
- **partner:** not capitalized. College student without intellectual disability that is a member of the college club and/or competes in Unified Sports on campus.
- **state Program:** Each state (US) has a Special Olympics Program that is responsible for all Special Olympics events and activities that happen within its local areas. This is the shortened version of the term "Special Olympics state Program" that is used in this resource. For colleges in countries outside of the United States, this is like a local or provincial program.

Models for Special Olympics Unified Sports on Campus

The term **college** is used in this resource to reference all postsecondary education institutions including colleges, universities, junior colleges and community colleges. Special Olympics Unified Sports can take place at any of these types of schools.

Unified Sports at the college level is ideally delivered through the department that is responsible for intramurals or recreational sports. This resource will refer to this department as **campus recreation**. Unified Sports can be delivered through other entities as well such as intercollegiate athletics, club sports, or Special Olympics College Clubs.

Each state in the United States has a program responsible for all Special Olympics events and activities. The term, **state Program**, will be used in reference for this organization in this resource.

Through collaboration between campus recreation and state programs, the following are the types of Unified Sports models that can be delivered on a campus:

Unified Sports Experience/Field Day:

Special Olympics Unified Sports® experiences bring together athletes and partners for participation in an informal, competitive environment. The purpose of this event is to showcase the talents and abilities of athletes and allow students to experience the fun of Unified Sports in a one-day setting. The hope is that their participation will inspire them and others to support Unified Sports within their communities on an ongoing basis.

Unified Sports Exhibition:

A Unified Sports single game experience, or exhibition, is a good option for campus recreation to introduce Unified Sports to a campus and to potential student partners. This should be an organized event with rules and officials and could include awards. This could also be an opportunity to showcase Unified Sports in a place with high exposure. Consider teaming up with intercollegiate athletics to set up a joint event with the college's varsity sports teams. For example, there could be a Unified basketball game before a varsity basketball game, or at halftime. Also, a Unified exhibition could be a part of a larger Unified Sports experience or clinic. Exhibition games could be a shortened scrimmage to fit time restrictions.

Unified Sports Tournaments:

Host a Unified Sports tournament with multiple games that take place in a single day or weekend. Many colleges offer tournaments as a part of its intramural program and this could be part of that. Consider collaboration with other club sports or varsity sports at a college to introduce Unified Sports. For example, if the college already offers Unified soccer and basketball, connect with the men's and women's club volleyball team to host a one-day Unified volleyball tournament.

Unified Sports Leagues:

Most colleges have some type of intramural or recreational league available to students. Unified Intramural Sports leagues function like any other intramural sport league, with the addition of Special Olympics athletes. Unified Sports offered in intramurals should match with what is being offered to other leagues and divisions. These leagues should receive the same amount of games, level of officiating, types of facilities and equipment, and awards at the end of the season.





SECTION 2:

Why Unified Sports? Testimonials and Examples



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

Why Unified Sports?

Unified Sports on campus are fun for partners, athletes, volunteers, spectators, and anyone else involved!

Unified Sports presents many positive experiences, such as:

- **Promotes positive sportsmanship** and participation by providing a new social and physical outlet. A Unified Sports opportunity provides even the most competitive students with a fun way to play the game they love.
- **Professional development and personal growth opportunities**, as well as introducing potential career opportunities for participants interested in special education, sports management, or a similar field.
- **Connecting students to local Special Olympics state Programs**, thus increasing the pool of potential partners, volunteers, and future donors.
- **Opening the doors of campus recreation** and its programs to participants who may not otherwise participate in intramural or club competition.
- **Bringing in campus partners** to experience the power of inclusion.
- **Creating lasting friendships** on and off the field, and connecting students to the community.
- **Showing that the campus is an inclusive and accepting place for all people.**

Addressing Challenges

Challenge: Potential conflicts with Special Olympics traditional programs

Athletes from the community might already be involved with local area Special Olympics teams that run at the same time.



Solution: It is important to be aware and avoid scheduling conflicts with these traditional team commitments. When done right, Unified Sports on a college campus enhances the local Special Olympics program and does not take away from it.

Challenge: Multiple colleges in one location

In some states, there may be multiple colleges in the same geographical location with a limited population of athletes in the area.



Solution: These colleges should look for solutions such as running a combined league, offering different Unified Sports league models, offering different sports, or having games on different nights.

Challenge: Lack of athletes of similar age and ability in area

For some colleges, especially those in remote locations, getting enough athletes of similar age and ability to participate in a league may be challenging.



Solution: The Unified Sports experience will still have impact even if the age and ability recommendation cannot be followed. If there are just a limited number of athletes in general, then the college may need to focus more on volunteerism and awareness opportunities – or focus on small team and individual Unified Sports offerings like activity days or clinics.

Challenge: Intramural Sports Program operating at capacity

Many intramural programs are already very popular on campus and the leagues might be operating at capacity where it does not seem like another league can be added.



Solution: Still have conversations about a Unified Sports league. A non-traditional time for intramurals might be the best time for the Unified Sports league. Pursue sports that might not be at capacity that could be turned into a Unified Sports league. **The value:** Unified Sports leagues attract student participants who are not already playing intramural sports. Overall value and impact is increased with the addition of Unified Sports leagues.

Challenge: Non-student participants

For campus recreation, it might be hard to justify offering up fields and courts for leagues that have non-student participants when such space is in high demand



Solution: Unified Sports recruits students who are not already playing intramural sports. The impact of Unified Sports provides social experiences unique from traditional intramural leagues. By diversifying league offerings, campus recreation can provide students with value beyond traditional sports. In addition, postsecondary inclusive education programs are growing, and colleges most likely already have students with intellectual disabilities enrolled on campus – Unified Sports leagues provide a more welcoming environment of acceptance and inclusion for these students.

Intramural Example: Central Michigan University

Central Michigan University and Special Olympics Michigan partnered to start the first Unified Intramural league on campus. The program was started with a 7 v 7 Unified soccer league that was offered alongside traditional intramural programming.

Following the examples provided, any sport or Unified programming on campus can adopt similar guidelines and timelines to be successful:



| Central Michigan University Unified Soccer Intramural League | | |
|---|--|--|
| Sport: | 7v7 Unified soccer | Identify a sport offered from the current intramural schedule that would be an ideal fit. Explore all options of Intramural Sports a college offers – any sport can become Unified! |
| Duration: | 6 weeks (once per week) | Schedule includes 1 week of assessment, 3 weeks of regular season play and 2 weeks of playoffs. |
| Team Composition: | 4-7 partners & 4-7 athletes per team | Have an equal number of partners and athletes per team. Include enough players on each team to have substitutes. |
| Leadership: | Campus recreation, Special Olympics Michigan, CMU's Special Olympics College Club | Campus recreation administers the league. The college club recruits partners and athletes and help determine rosters. The state Program acts as a resource for the league and helps in the planning process. |
| Game Play: | Intramural Rules w/ Unified Sports Modifications | Campus recreation and the state Program should meet and determine the playing rules for the league. |
| Future Growth: | Basketball, flag football, volleyball, kickball, and bowling | Consider what sports could be delivered next – because the partners and athletes will demand more chances to play! |

Central Michigan University Unified Soccer Sample Timeline

| | | |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| 3 months prior | Initial meeting and planning of league | Between campus recreation, state Program and college club. |
| 2 months prior | Partner and athlete recruitment | College club begins to promote league and find interest from other students. |
| 1 month prior | Partner and athlete registration | Register any students through IMLeagues or other system campus recreation uses. |
| Week 1 | Assessment Day | Evaluate players in order to divide up into evenly matched teams. |
| Week 2 | Regular season begins | Games begin. |
| Week 5 | Playoffs begin | Postseason play – single elimination tournament. |
| Week 6 | Championship Night | Played the same night as other Intramural Soccer leagues' championship games. |

This timeline is merely an example – modifications should be made based on each school's experience. Be sure to contact the appropriate campus partners to discuss how long it will take to book field space, get the club established, etc. Regulations for each school vary, so the more advanced the plan, the better the chances will be for being able to start up your league and events more easily.

NIRSA Testimonial #1: University of Oregon



UNIVERSITY
OF OREGON

Department of Physical Education & Recreation, University of Oregon

Unified Intramural Sports leagues offered: Indoor Soccer, Outdoor Soccer, Basketball

“The Unified Sports program at the University of Oregon (UO) has brought together hundreds of students and local Special Olympics athletes to play, compete, and build relationships with one another. Through this collaboration between the PE & Recreation department and Special Olympics, we have been able to open up our campus to members of our community that have historically been excluded from campus life, sports, and society for far too long. Brandon Schmit, a Unified athlete here at UO, speaks to the impact the program has had on him: “Playing with the university students, it’s nice because it gives me more of a circle of friends and gets me out and about and meeting new people.”

The impact of Unified Sports is not only felt by the athletes but is just as significant for the student partners. After competing at the NIRSA Unified National Championship, Nathan Olsen, a Unified partner, said, “The game of basketball has always been a fundamental part of who I am and playing Unified was hands down the best experience I have ever had with this game. I was reminded how basketball is way more than just a game and there is so much more than just winning or losing.”

We began this program in January of 2018 hoping that we had enough UO students come out to field two basketball teams.; Fast forward one year and we were able to put together two soccer leagues, six intramural basketball teams, and travel out-of-state to compete against other institutions and programs. Our students and athletes have made lifelong friendships and memories all thanks to the simple concept of playing together.”

- Sean Graninger



Sean Graninger, Assistant Director for
Intramural Sports and Youth Camps

NIRSA Testimonial #2: UNC Charlotte



Unified Intramural Sports leagues offered: Flag Football, Soccer, Basketball, Pickleball

"Here at UNC Charlotte, we are excited for the opportunity to partner with Special Olympics and our on-campus Special Olympics College Club to offer Unified Sports Leagues for Intramural Sports. This partnership allows us to connect college students without intellectual disabilities to those with intellectual disabilities. This connection takes place through sports and other bonding opportunities that build friendships and lead the social justice movement of Special Olympics on our campus. This network seeks the membership of students to target the common goal of enhancing the lives of a people with intellectual disabilities and building a more accepting – and less stigmatizing – world for all.

In Fall 2018, we introduced Unified flag football and in Spring 2019, we introduced Unified soccer. This past year we started off with 4 teams in each sport; however, we are hoping to grow that number in the future. Each year we are looking to expand on the sports we are able to offer as well as increase participation from partners and athletes. This upcoming year we are looking to add basketball and pickleball.

One of our University Recreation core values is inclusion, and we believe that by fostering a culture of acceptance, we welcome each member of our community to feel invited and respected through our programs. One of our student leaders mentioned, "I have had several parents/guardians reach out with a very sincere appreciation for our Unified Sports initiative. Several, for example, have shared how they struggle to get their children to move/exercise, and how this initiative has put exercise into a fun context." The partners and athletes love getting out there and being active and I am so grateful to be a part of this experience that is changing lives!"

- Sophie Rattray



Sophie Rattray, Assistant Director Intramural Sports

NIRSA Testimonial #3: University of Wisconsin Madison



**RECREATION
& WELLBEING**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Unified Intramural Sports leagues offered: Flag Football, Volleyball, Basketball

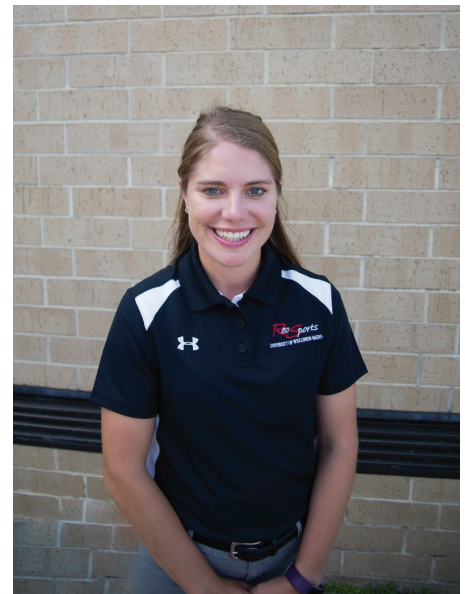
“Adding Unified Sports to the intramural sports calendar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison was an easy decision. It provided an opportunity to engage new participants in our program and support our divisional vision “to build a movement of healthy habits through inclusion, education, innovation, and connection”. We have been able to partner with Special Olympics Wisconsin to create a Unified Sports program that supports both organizations’ goals and gives athletes and partners the opportunity to play side by side!

The impact of adding Unified Sports has far exceed initial expectations for us at Recreation & Wellbeing. Many of our partners had never participated in intramural sports before competing on a Unified Sports team. Athletes and partners have developed lasting relationships that go far beyond our weekly competitions. They are celebrating birthdays together and creating genuine friendships. The first Unified Sports event of the year feels like a reunion with the amount of excitement for the year ahead.

Unified Sports also has allowed our student employees the opportunity to interact with people with disabilities in their roles as officials and supervisors. We have been able to provide our staff education on disability culture and using person first language. They have been able to practice these life-long skills in a controlled, educational environment during their Unified Sports shifts. Working on a college campus, it is experiences like this that allow students to grow skill sets and practice for life after college.

Unified Sports shifts are some of the most sought after by our student employees due to the positive environment and focus on enjoyment of sport. Getting back to the basics of sports being an outlet for physical and social wellbeing is felt by staff, athletes, and partners. As one partner said, “I played Unified flag football and my team won the championships. The athletes and UW students had the best night event! This is what I think of when I think of Rec Sports.” As an administrator, these are the feelings we want all of our participants to have after interacting with our programs and it happens effortless with Unified Sports.”

- Abby Van Note



Abby Van Note, Coordinator of Sport Programs



SECTION 3:

Elements of Unified Intramural Sports Leagues



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

Elements of Unified Intramural Sports Leagues

The key to a successful season of Unified Intramural Sports is to make sure all participants experience meaningful inclusion. When the structure behind the season is planned, it allows for all athletes and Unified partners to form friendships and reach their full potential. Use this guide to build the framework for a successful season of Unified Intramural Sports.

Meaningful inclusion: This concept promotes the understanding of everyone's individual value, and the mutual benefits that come from each person's contribution to the relationship. It reflects significant inclusion, not just a gratuitous acknowledgement.

Planning

- Initial meetings
- League rules
- Styles of Unified Sports
 - Competitive
 - Player Development
- Uniforms and equipment
- Facilities and risk management
- Payment

Players

- Athlete and partner recruitment
- Unified Sports orientation
- Assessment day
- Team assignment

Performance

- Coaching
- Officiating
- Medical
- Game day registration
- Regular season play
- Championship night



Planning

Initial Meetings

The initial meetings between campus recreation and state Program staff should be held, at the latest, the semester before the desired season. To be ready for a fall sport, plan in the spring or summer. To be ready for a spring sport, plan in the fall. While it is never too late to try to reach out to get a league started, an earlier meeting time will allow for more planning and less surprises when it comes time to play.

This initial meeting should be used to discuss fees and costs, facility requirements, rules and officiating, uniforms, registration processes, and additional equipment needs. Risk management and liability/insurance needs should also be reviewed and agreed on.

Ideal roles for students to fill:

- Athlete and partner recruitment
- League day and time selection
- League rules
- Partner training and orientation
- “Day of” logistics and execution for games and assessment



TOP TIP

At these initial meetings, campus recreation staff and/or state Program staff could identify a student leader or group of student leaders to assist with the league. This could be an existing or new Special Olympics College Club or a student-staff member from campus recreation.

League Rules

There will likely be differences between campus intramural rules and official [Special Olympics Unified Sports rules](#). Prior to the season starting, campus recreation and the state Program (and the college club, if applicable) should meet to discuss the rules of play, and specifically where current campus rules and Special Olympics rules differ. The final decision for the Unified Intramural Sports league rules might be to adopt campus rules, Special Olympics rules, or to have a hybrid model that combines aspects of both.

Consider the following when discussing how to select or combine rules to come up with the best option:

- What is the intent/purpose of the rule?
- Will rule differences between Unified and other intramural leagues cause confusion for officials?
- If collegiate intramural teams would like to advance to state Program competitions, it will be played under official Special Olympics rules.

The final thing to consider is the model of play of your league. There are two styles of Unified Sports on a college campus – competitive and player development.

Competitive

Competitive means that athletes and partners are of similar ability levels, can play within the standard rules of the game, and the purpose of the league is competition. Results and awards are based on place of finish in the league. There should be no modifications to official rules for the league and all infractions/violations of the rules should be called by the officials. There should be no restrictions placed on any player’s ability to contribute to the team, including limitations on scoring. Both partners and athletes are expected to give their maximum effort in this model of play. All national level Unified Sports competitions are played in the competitive model.

Player Development

Player Development means that athletes and partners do not have to be of similar ability and there is a focus on skill development. While there is a score and rules to follow, there are some rule modifications that are allowed. Results and awards can be based on place of finish or participation. In this model, teammates of higher ability take on the role of assisting and facilitating play for teammates of lower ability.

Soccer, basketball, and volleyball should have very little differences between campus and Special Olympics rules in the competitive model. Flag Football will have the most rule differences between the two rulebooks.

View the [Special Olympics Sports Essentials resource](#) to learn and understand how to create quality Unified Sports rules.

TOP TIP

When examining rule differences between campus intramurals and Special Olympics rules, think about why the rule is in place and that might let you know where it is best to compromise. Some examples:

- **Timing, Field and Equipment Rules:** This might be restricted based on the facility space and time allotted for games, so it probably would make sense to adopt the campus standard for these types of rules
- **Gameplay Rules:** There might be Special Olympics rules that are more aware of physical limitations and will promote gameplay for all (i.e. in soccer, players can “kick-in” a ball that has gone out of bounds because there might be physical limitations that prevent a legal “throw-in”).



Uniforms and Equipment

Regarding uniforms and equipment, campus recreation should have the same expectations and provide the same options to the Unified leagues as any other intramural league. It is recommended that leagues require uniforms that are the same or similar color to existing intramural teams. Many campus recreation or state Programs will supply uniforms to the players. These uniforms would be turned in either at the end of each competition or at the end of the season.

Facilities and Risk Management

Unified Intramural Sports league competitions should take place on the same fields and courts as any other intramural league. It is beneficial to the program, the students and the campus when Unified Sports games are being played next to, immediately prior to, and/or immediately after games from other divisions.

Create a plan for any athletes from the community (non-students) for being able to get to the competition site if it is held in an access-controlled facility (need a membership to enter). There is also a likelihood that a Unified Intramural Sports league will attract more attendance from family and friends than other leagues, so be sure to determine the accessibility of games to spectators.



When bringing any community members to an on-campus activity like intramurals, a college may require particular risk management and liability documentation. Work with the college's risk management office to determine what would be required to make a league happen. The state Program may be able to sign off on required agreements or provide necessary documents/insurance.

Payment

It is very common for students to pay for their intramural sports teams at college. The expectation for payment for a Unified Intramural Sports league should also be discussed. While revenue generation is not a common goal of Unified Sports offerings at colleges, it is recognized that there are certain costs such as officiating and field prep that accompany any league. This should be a conversation between campus recreation and the state Program during the planning process.

Players

Athlete and Partner Recruitment

In Unified Intramural Sports, athletes and partners will be of similar age and have similar ability levels. If there is a limited number of athletes or partners available, then the age and ability range can be widened. Keep this in mind when recruiting athletes and partners for the leagues.

Special Olympics athlete (referred to as **athlete** in this guide): Either a student at the university, or an individual from the community with an intellectual disability that competes in Unified Sports on campus. At the college level, athletes should be adults with the ideal age range being 18-34 years old.

To find if your college has an inclusive education program:

- ThinkCollege.net provides a list of colleges with inclusive education programs. The students in these programs would be ideal candidates to join Unified Sports as athletes.

To recruit athletes from the community:

- Work with the state Program to see how to best connect with athletes from the community. The state Program might involve a local area coordinator to connect with athletes or may directly provide a list of athlete contacts.

Unified partner (referred to as **partner** in this guide): A student without an intellectual disability that competes in Unified Sports on campus. Partners should all be currently enrolled and in good standing with the college. Unified Intramural Sports leagues should be promoted with the intramural sports schedule so all students can see and feel free to join.

Some great groups for campus recreation to find potential partners include:

- Special Olympics College Club
- Campus Recreation student staff
- Greek organizations
 - National partner Greek organizations of Special Olympics: Sigma Tau Gamma and Alpha Phi Omega
- Varsity/Club Sport athletes in their off season
 - National partner intercollegiate athletic associations of Special Olympics: NCAA DIII and NAIA
- Academic programs and groups like sports management and special education

TOP TIP

While it is great to reach out to current intramural participants or students involved in the above groups, studies show that Unified Sports are successful entry points to campus engagement for students that are not currently involved in any other groups or teams. Unified Sports leagues will expand the reach of the intramural program.



Utilize any online registration/tracking tool for intramurals for Unified Sports leagues as well. Whether it is IMLeagues or another program, this will make the experience feel normative and a part of the larger intramural programs at the school. Most Unified Intramural Sports leagues require people to sign up as individuals and then they are placed on teams. This makes Unified Sports leagues an ideal opportunity to direct “Free Agents” to as well.

Unified Sports Orientation

A week or two prior to the first game, new athletes and partners should go through a Unified Sports Orientation. Each league can determine if returning partners and athletes are required to go through this orientation as well.

The following should be conducted during the orientation:

- Athlete/partner training covering the concept, history, and philosophy of Unified Sports on campus, statewide, and nationally
- Expectations of partners and athletes during and outside of competition
- [An overview of meaningful inclusion and player dominance](#)
- An overview of league rules
- Required paperwork by the state Program for partners and athletes should be filled out, if not previously turned in with office
- Required paperwork by campus recreation for partners and athletes should be filled out, if not previously turned in with office

BEST PRACTICE: state Programs and Special Olympics College Clubs should be invited to help lead the orientations as they will have expertise and knowledge of interacting with people with intellectual disabilities that might be new to campus recreation staff.

Assessment Day

The week prior to the first games, participants should go through an assessment day to test their sport-specific skills in order to determine the most competitively balanced team rosters. In an assessment, participants are divided into small Unified groups of partners and athletes. The groups then go through a series of drills/stations that test individual sport-specific skills. Participants receive a score at each drill/station based on their performance. In addition to the drill/station score, observation notes that help assess their skill level are taken. Examples of drills/stations can be found within the [Special Olympics official sports rules](#).



If time permits after the assessments are completed, scrimmages should take place with league administrators observing and taking notes on the participants.

Team Assignment

After assessment day, league administrators, coaches, and captains should meet with assessment scores and notes to create league rosters that will lead to the most competitively balanced teams. Some Programs even allow for the team's captains or coaches to draft their teams. Prior to the first week of play, partners and athletes will be notified of their team. On the first night of league play, participants are required to arrive 20-30 minutes before the game time so teams can be introduced to each other, a team name can be determined, and team uniforms can be distributed.



TOP TIP

Work with the state Program to see if team uniforms can be purchased for the league. These uniforms can be distributed to players during week one and then collected on championship night following the teams' final games.



Performance

Coaching

Most intramural teams do not have coaches, but it might be in the best interest of the Unified Sports leagues to have select partners or athletes serve in a non-playing coaching/captain role for the teams. Consider adjusting rules to allow for coaches to call time-outs if current rules do not allow for this. These coaches can be found during the recruitment process and should run through an initial sport-specific training by the state Program and/or campus recreation. Coaches should attend the assessment day.



The role of the coaches should be as follows:

- Make sure that team strategy keeps all players meaningfully involved
- Help players understand how each unique role is important to team success
- Manage substitutions and lineups to ensure that all players get an appropriate amount of playing time and that the required partner-to-athlete ratio is maintained during games.

TOP TIP

As Unified Intramural Sports leagues grow, more and more students and athletes will want to participate. Using opportunities like coaching is great for moving experienced players into a mentorship role or for allowing people who might not enjoy playing the sport a way to be involved.



Officiating

The officials should be trained intramural officials that are used in all the other intramural leagues. Each official should go through campus recreation intramural sports trainings and be made aware of the specific Special Olympics rule changes. state Program staff can be incorporated into this training to answer questions relating to the game management for the league and how to interact with players with intellectual disabilities. Check with a state Program if any forms/certifications are required for the officials who officiate these leagues (i.e. Class A volunteering or Protective Behaviors).

With Officials training, the following two models are most common:

- Unified Sports rules modifications are included throughout the training and are provided to all officials so anyone on the staff can officiate
- A select group of officials are chosen to officiate the Unified Sports league. This group stays for an extended amount of time to get training on Unified specific rules.



TOP TIP

Have consistent officials for the Unified Sports leagues from week to week. Much like playing sports, officiating gets better with experience. Officials will get more comfortable and familiar with the players and rules in the Unified divisions as the season progresses – leading to high level officiating for the playoffs and championships.

Medical

Medical response should be discussed between campus recreation and state Program prior to the start of season to make sure that all risk management requirements are met. Emergency action plans should be discussed as well. In case of a major injury or emergency, it is always recommended that emergency services are called to the scene. Staff should have up-to-date medical information and waivers for all athletes participating at the site of the competition. This medical information will include medications and allergies as well as any type of medical conditions that a first-responder or athletic trainer would need to know.

TOP TIP

Having a person trained in CPR and First Aid and the appropriate medical kits on site makes the competitions a much safer experience.



Game Day Registration

Players should check-in with campus recreation staff prior to each intramural game to verify that they are on the roster, eligible, and have all required forms turned in. Partners should be required to present identification consistent with the requirements for any other intramural league. If athletes are from the community, league administration can determine how check-in is handled.

Team rosters and player eligibility should be maintained throughout the season. All required documentation can be kept electronically or by hard copy and housed in the league offices. Online systems like [IMLeagues](#) account for partners and athletes so they can be added to score sheets and online tracking.

Regular Season Play

The regular season consists of one game per week for three to six weeks, depending on the amount of teams. The length of the regular season should match that of traditional intramural leagues. In an ideal league, all teams should play each other at least once during the regular season. Regular season play should fall under the same timing rules as all other intramural leagues in that sport. The regular season results will determine seeding for postseason play.



Championship Night

Just like any other intramural league on campus, campus recreation should put on a Championship Night for the Unified Sports division. The championship winning players should receive what students typically get for winning an intramural championship (i.e. Championship T-Shirt). Teams should also be recognized with all other league champions, whether that is on a poster or on social media.

Championship Night for the Unified Sports division is a great opportunity to promote the intramural program with a unique experience that media will want to cover and groups will want to be a part of.



Consider the following to add entertainment and provide a big event feel:

- Invite other campus departments to attend, like intercollegiate athletics and academic programs
- Invite student organizations such as club sports and greek groups
- Invite the band, cheerleading team, dance team, etc. for gametime and halftime performances
- Invite university administration and high profile figureheads such as the President, Board of Directors, Athletics Director, and coaches as VIP guests
- Invite campus and community media outlets
- Secure a sound system for music and announcing prior to, during, and after the game
- Promote the Unified program utilizing scoreboards and graphics



TOP TIP

Explore options, whether with the state Program or NIRSA, for Unified Sports league champions to be able to advance to state, regional, national or international competition.

Additional Resources

Complete the College club interest form:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfYzK78cZrjq0mvNUABQF8JAwCkXln0_lccRCpOnAIX3MIkmQ/viewform?hl=en&formkey=dGlaTVg4azhnS19jUTNIrTB6MjNzRGc6MA..#gid=0

Learn more about NIRSA:

<http://play.nirsa.net/nirsa-championship-series/>

Special Olympics Unified Sports Essentials

<https://resources.specialolympics.org/sports-essentials/sports-and-coaching>

Find a NCAA DIII institution near you:

<https://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/ncaa-member-schools>

Find an NAIA institution near you:

<https://www.naia.org/schools/membership-map>

Find a Sigma Tau Gamma chapter:

<https://sigtau.org/chapters/>

Find an Alpha Phi Omega Chapter:

<https://apo.org/start-a-chapter/chapter-map/>

ThinkCollege

<https://thinkcollege.net/college-search>

The principle of Meaningful Inclusion

<https://media.specialolympics.org/sona/Principle-of-Meaningful-Involvement-one-pager.pdf>

IMLeagues

<https://www.imleagues.com/spa/portal/home>

Access all other Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Resources:

<https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools>

Thanks for reading through the Unified Intramural Sports Resource. Best of luck in your future endeavors. Should you have any questions, reach out to your local Special Olympics office. For additional help, email socollege@specialolympics.org