

Conference Proceedings

Building Disability Knowledge Through Community-Based Internships and Service-Learning Programs: A Panel Discussion

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Abstract

The purpose of the panel discussion was to provide a forum for participants to engage in a thoughtful discussion on community-based physical activity programs being offered for disabled individuals in their communities. Representatives from California State University at Chico, Kean University, and University of Hawai'i at Mānoa shared their programs.

Keywords: Community-based, physical activity, internships, service-learning.

Building Disability Knowledge Through Community-Based Internships and Service- Learning Programs

Service-learning experiences and community-based Adapted Physical Education (APE) internships have long been considered critical to the learning experiences of teacher candidates in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) and APE in teacher licensure programs across higher education institutions. Typically, these experiences are the final requirements prior to successful program completion. The value of real-life experiences for teacher candidates is undeniable (Bragg Thompson, 2025) and disabled individuals share that this is a valuable experience for them as well (Bragg Thompson, 2025; SHAPE, 2016)

There is a distinction between service-learning and community-based programs. Service-learning programs integrate community service with structured learning experiences, allowing participants to apply their skills and knowledge to real-world issues while developing personally and professionally (Bragg Thompson, 2025). These programs emphasize reciprocal benefits, both for the participants and the communities they serve. Community-based APE programs are designed to provide physical education and recreational opportunities for disabled individuals in community settings, rather than just within schools (SHAPE, 2016). These programs aim to promote lifelong physical activity, social engagement, and independence by incorporating activities that individuals can access outside of school (SHAPE, 2016).

The purpose of the panel discussion was to provide an opportunity for audience members to learn about what service-learning experiences and community-based APE programs are being offered by the panel members at their institutions and to provide ideas for

audience members to create programs in their geographical areas in addition to programs that are already being offered.

2025 Pacific Rim Conference

The 40th annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability was held on April 15th and 16th, 2025 at the Hawai'i Convention Center in Honolulu, HI. The conference is offered through the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The theme of the conference was "By Us and For Us: Legacy and Future of Our Movement," in celebration of 40 years of hosting the Pac Rim conference. This panel discussion which took place April 16 was intended to present programs being offered in PETE and APE at three higher education institutions and have audience discussion on programs being offered in their geographical areas.

The panel learning outcomes included:

1. Understand how current university students could support current or potential programs
2. Identify potential regional needs for disabled individuals
3. Identify strategies for their organizations to partner with higher education institutions.

Initially, each representative from the three different higher education institutions: California State University at Chico; Kean University; and University of Hawai'i at Mānoa shared their community-based internships, community-based internships beyond student teaching; and service-learning experiences being offered to students at their respective institutions.

California State University at Chico

Disabled students are historically underserved in rural areas, where resources are limited and families and disabled adults must travel greater distances to access programs and resources (McCabe & Ruppert, 2023). Chico State has a long history of providing adapted sports and modified PA activities to the greater north state through a variety of programs serving a range of disabled stakeholders while simultaneously actively training future professionals and educators across a variety of disciplines including kinesiology, child development, special education, recreation, communication science and disorders, psychology, nursing and exercise physiology.

Chico State Autism Clinic

This program provides 1:1 motor skill acquisition practice for autistic children in a sensory rich environment. Rooted in a child centered approach, children attend one time a week for 50 minutes to work on individualized skills to help them be physically active for life. This program also provides 3 teen group programs for participants who would like to improve their social skills in group games and physical fitness settings. This program currently serves over 50 families from the community and provides internships for 20 students each semester.

BEWEL 1

Beyond Exercise Wellness Enhancement for Life 1 (BEWEL 1) provides support for modified physical activity experiences for adults with physical disabilities from the community. These participants, ranging in age from 30-87 are referred from local hospitals and outpatient programs to continue their rehabilitation in a supported environment. Students from kinesiology and various other health programs on campus support modified stretching, weight training, walking, cycling and yoga activities in a supervised and supportive

environment two days a week for 50 minutes. This program currently serves 35 community members and provides service learning to 50 plus students.

BEWEL 2

Beyond Exercise Wellness Enhancement for Life 2 (BEWEL 2) provides modified sports activities for local high school students as well as adults in supported day programs who come to the university two times per week. This program provides both group and individualized activities centered around weekly themes including striking, movement patterns, throwing and catching, kicking and receiving, volleying and target games and sports. This program serves approximately 50 community members weekly and provides service-learning opportunities to 25 students weekly.

Chico State Adapted Sports Day

This is our program's largest event, providing a one-day event where students with low incidence disability from 15 rural counties participate in wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, rock climbing, goal ball, track and field events, bowling, and soccer. There are also several sensory activities for participants to engage in. This program is a close partnership with local school districts, the Northern California Adapted Physical Education Consortium, Corning High School, and Chico State, with the high school and university providing 1:1 of volunteers to participants for the duration of the event.

These programs are strengthened further by our partnerships both on and off campus. On campus, these partnerships include the College of Communication and Education, the Mechatronics Department, Department of Child Development, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, the Accessibility Resource Center, the Neurodiversity and Disability Faculty and Staff Association and the Neurodiversity and Disability Student Club. Off campus and in the broader region, partnerships and support include Ability First Sports, Far Northern

Regional Center, regional community colleges and high schools, and Butte County Office of Education.

Kean University

APE and Adapted Physical Activity programs are essential in creating inclusive opportunities for disabled youth. Participation in structured physical activity has been shown to improve not only physical health but also social, emotional, and cognitive development (Block, 2016; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018). Kean University has developed several innovative programs, including the Cougars Learning Important Motor Behaviors (C.L.I.M.B.) APE Program, Camp Abilities at the Toms River Field of Dreams, and Kean Unified Sports. These initiatives serve as exemplary models of how higher education institutions can foster community partnerships, promote inclusion, and prepare future professionals in the field.

Cougars Learning Important Motor Behaviors (C.L.I.M.B.) Adapted Physical Education Program

The Cougars C.L.I.M.B. APE Program is a seven-week program designed for disabled children and adolescents, ages 5–21. Since its inception in 2022, the program has served more than 150 families in Union and Toms River, NJ. C.L.I.M.B. not only provides direct benefits for participating athletes but also prepares undergraduate and graduate students at Kean University for careers in physical education, APE, special education, and related fields. Students enrolled in APE coursework, internships, and teacher preparation programs gain practical experience working one-on-one with youth. Research demonstrates that service-learning in APE enhances preservice teachers' confidence, attitudes, and instructional skills (Kalyvas & Reid, 2003; Haegele & Zhu, 2017).

Key collaborations have strengthened the program, including partnerships with other Kean University departments, local school districts, and the Toms River Field of Dreams, a fully accessible recreational facility. These partnerships exemplify best practices in community-engaged scholarship.

Camp Abilities Kean University

Camp Abilities Kean University held at the RWJBarnabas Toms River Field of Dreams is an educational sports camp for blind and low vision youth, ages 7–21. The program has served more than 30 families and trained over 60 future professionals since its founding. Camp Abilities offers youth the chance to learn fundamental and advanced sport skills, fostering independence, confidence, and physical fitness (Lieberman, Lepore, & Haegele, 2020).

Volunteers and professionals from diverse fields, including physical education, APE, special education, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, contribute to the multidisciplinary support system at camp. Partnerships with Shore Orientation & Mobility, the NJ Commission for the Blind, the Toms River Field of Dreams, local food vendors, and Hammer Surf School provide campers with access to a wide range of adapted sporting experiences, including track and field, blind soccer, blind tennis, and surfing.

The importance of programs such as Camp Abilities is well documented: low vision children often face barriers to participation in physical activity, including limited access to programs, trained professionals, and accessible facilities (Haegele & Porretta, 2015). Camp Abilities directly addresses these disparities.

Kean Unified Sports

Kean Unified Sports is conducted in collaboration with Special Olympics New Jersey, providing opportunities for disabled and nondisabled athletes training and competing

together. Current offerings include basketball in the spring and soccer in the fall, with past activities including volleyball, taekwondo, and esports. Participation typically involves 35–45 athletes and partners each season.

Unified Sports is grounded in the principle of social inclusion through shared sports experiences, fostering respect, friendship, and community integration (Special Olympics, 2021). By participating in Unified Sports, Kean students gain practical experience in coaching, inclusive instruction, and leadership while promoting campus and community engagement.

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Wellness is critical to overall well-being for all individuals and can be even more important for disabled individuals as it offers opportunities to not only engage in physical activities but also to socialize with peers that they may not have otherwise. Dr. Kelle Murphy who teaches in Disability Studies Program offered through the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa created her Wellness Matters Programs to offer opportunities I/DD community, their caregivers and family members to spend quality time together enjoying physical activity and activities related to wellness. The Wellness Matters programs consist of three separate programs:

Inclusive First Aid/CPR/AED

About 65% of Americans receive CPR certification; however, only about 18% maintain the certification. The statistics are even less for certification for disabled individuals. Twenty-six percent of Americans are living with a disability. These statistics demonstrate the need for disabled individuals, caregivers, and family members to have the opportunity to become certified. This program was developed to address this need and is open to the I/DD community, caregivers, and family members. The ability to identify and respond to various

health issues, provide proper First Aid and how to perform CPR/AED are integral components of health and wellness. Participants learn how to assess the scene for safety, appropriate CPR and First Aid based on the assessment, how to address choking, and other health-related, injury-related, and environmental-related situations. Classes offered each semester in evenings two days a week: Day 1- First Aid and Day 2- CPR/AED. Upon successful completion, participants receive American Heart Association certification. Modifications are made and a culturally relevant curriculum is presented. Since program inception in 2022, over 100 community members have completed the training and received AHA certification.

Swim Safe: ASD Program

Drowning is among the leading causes of death for Autistic individuals and accounts for 91% of the US total. Autistic individuals are attracted to water because it is calming and peaceful. Approximately 48% of Autistic people elope/wander. When they do this, they may wander towards a body of water and will want to jump in to feel the calming effects. This program was developed to address these alarming statistics and is open to Autistic people ages 4 to adult and their parents/guardians, family members, or relatives who serve as the instructor. Participants learn basic swimming skills and safety skills. Classes offered once a week for 10 weeks at two locations: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and Salvation Army Kroc Center, Kapolei and are offered throughout the year. Three 30-min lessons are offered to 5 families per lesson. Since its inception in 2017, over 300 families have participated.

Wellness Matters Physical Activity Program

Less than 45% of individuals with a mobility disability engage in physical activity and approximately 40% of disabled individuals in the U.S. experience social isolation. This program was developed to provide opportunities to address these statistics and is open to the

I/DD community ages 14 to adult, caregivers, family members, and coaches. Participants are offered the opportunity to engage in popular lifetime activities, Paralympic activities, and adapted physical activities. Classes are offered: Once a week for 10 weeks for 1 hour in the evenings. This is a newer program and to date, over 25 families have participated in various activities offered.

Small Group Discussions

After presenting each program, the audience was divided into three groups and each presenter led a small group discussion guided by the following questions:

1. What are the potential needs in your region for disabled individuals?
2. How can your university students support current or potential programs?
3. Support each other with brainstorming strategies for organizations to partner with higher education institutions.

Themes from Discussions

Capacity Building Challenges and Successes

During the small group discussions, several overarching themes emerged related to the needs of disabled individuals and the role higher education institutions could play in supporting community programs. A central theme was the challenge of capacity building, with many participants noting long waitlists for services and the pressing need for more programming opportunities. Staffing shortages were highlighted as one of the most significant barriers to expanding or sustaining services, with organizations struggling to recruit and retain qualified personnel. These challenges were compounded by difficulties in maintaining consistent volunteer engagement, particularly in regions with fewer available

resources.

Service Cliff

Another major theme centered on the lack of adult and transition-age programming. Participants emphasized the “services cliff” that occurs once individuals exit school-based programs, leaving many families without adequate support for adulthood. This gap in the lifespan of services underscores the need for more intentional programming for adults and young adults with disabilities, as well as stronger continuity of care throughout different life stages. These comments are supported by current research highlighting the importance of policies having mechanisms and action plans in place to promote inclusivity and accessibility regarding education and health for disabled young adults and their families (Zukerman et al., 2024).

Lack of Resources and Time to Plan

Networking and collaboration were additional areas of concern. Participants described difficulties in connecting with other organizations and with universities due to time constraints and competing priorities. The development of coordinated referral systems, resource sharing, and regular networking opportunities were suggested as a way to improve collaboration and reduce duplication of efforts. The issue of funding and resources also emerged as a critical theme. Many organizations operate under tight budgets and rely heavily on grants or short-term funding cycles, which can threaten long-term sustainability. With the current administration in the United States, funded grants continue to be under scrutiny with funding dollars in jeopardy. Additionally, allocations continue to shrink, making an already strained system stretched beyond capacity. Participants expressed the need for creative

funding strategies, shared resource models, and partnerships that could stretch limited dollars further but there did not seem to be solutions, only condolences that could be shared.

Rural vs Urban Programming

Finally, discussions highlighted the geographic inequities in service provision. Participants from rural areas described significant challenges related to program availability. In contrast, those in urban settings acknowledged that while more programs were available, demand was so high that lengthy waitlists remained a persistent barrier. For families, these wait times exacerbated stress and led to missed developmental windows for timely intervention. Such concerns also align with current research findings that point to both the shortage of rural services and the overburdening of urban systems (Lindsay et al., 2025). Taken together, these disparities reinforced the importance of tailoring solutions to local contexts—whether that means expanding telehealth options for rural areas, investing in workforce development to reduce wait times in cities, or building more flexible hybrid service models that can adapt to community-specific needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the panel underscored the important role of service-learning and community-based APE programs in advancing both teacher preparation and opportunities for disabled individuals. Across the three universities represented, programs demonstrated the mutual benefits of experiential learning: teacher candidates gained confidence, competence, and professional readiness, while disabled individuals and their families accessed meaningful opportunities for physical activity, social connection, and wellness. Participant discussions revealed pressing challenges—such as capacity limitations, staffing shortages, funding

instability, and the “service cliff” that leaves many transition-age youth and adults without adequate programming—while also highlighting the need for innovation and collaboration. Geographic inequities further complicate these challenges, with rural families facing accessibility barriers and urban families burdened by long waitlists, reinforcing that one-size-fits-all solutions are inadequate. Instead, sustainable progress depends on tailoring programs to local contexts, building strong partnerships across higher education, community organizations, and healthcare providers, and advocating for stable funding structures to support long-term impact. Moving forward, intentional efforts to expand capacity, strengthen partnerships, and address systemic inequities will be essential for ensuring that service-learning and community-based APE/physical activity programs continue to thrive and serve as models of inclusive, community-engaged practice.

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