



**Special Olympics**



## Special Olympics and NIRSA partnership

Dedicated to promoting 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 students and local Special Olympics athletes of similar age.

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

### **Unified Sports Experiences:**

Special Olympics Unified Sports® Experiences bring together Special Olympics athletes and college students for participation in an informal competitive environment. The purpose of this event is to showcase the talents and abilities of Special Olympics athletes and allow the 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 Intramural League or Club team:**

Unified Sports Intramural leagues and Sport Club teams function similar to any other intramural or club sport on campus with the addition of local Special Olympics athletes.

Many colleges and universities have some type of intramural or recreational league available to students. 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.

### **Example League Information**

**What:** 7 v 7 or 5 v 5 Intramural Unified Soccer League

**When:** 4-6 weeks, once per week

**Who:** 3-6 Students (Partners) and at least 3-5 local Special Olympics Athletes per team

**Where:** IM Fields or sport club practice space



**Leadership:** University Recreation (UREC) & Special Olympics (SO) Staff, student sport club officer (or student leader) and/or executive board

**Game Play:** Adapted to follow Special Olympics Unified rules & guidelines

**Future Growth:** Basketball, flag football and other sports

### **Sample Timeline**

**3 months before student and athlete registration** – Initial meetings and planning

**2 months before** – Student & athlete recruitment

### **Student and athlete registration**

**Two week before league play** – Assessment Day

**One week before** – Teams assigned and team bonding opportunities

**Duration of League competition** – 4-6 weeks

### **Championship Night**

### **Initial Meetings**

The initial meetings between UREC and Special Olympics representatives should be held roughly 3 months before the start of the proposed season to discuss timing and opportunities. One such opportunity to keep in mind is that if UREC has a timeslot that is consistently hard to fill, Special Olympics Unified Sports could fill in that time. Additionally, this meeting should be used to discuss fees and cost, facility requirements, rules and officiating, uniforms, registration processes, and any additional equipment needs (such as small sized soccer goals for 5v5 soccer). Risk management (what was needed for liability purposes) should also be reviewed and clarified.

At these initial meetings, campus recreation staff could identify a student leader or group of student leaders who could be responsible for club/league operations. Students will be responsible for completing the paperwork and attending the meetings necessary to establish a Unified Sports sport club on campus. CMU and Special Olympics Michigan also identified one student from UREC and one from Special Olympics that would take the lead in recruiting, rules, training and “day of” logistics.

### **Student & Athlete Recruitment**

Special Olympics athletes can be recruited through a local area. Special Olympics will contact the area director and ask for athletes to participate. With the addition of Unified Sports Intramural/club sports



the athletes will not only have expanded opportunities to compete but also gain the chance to interact with college students their same age.

Students can be recruited directly by the UREC department or the student leaders in charge. Students can also be recruited through the UREC staff, fraternities and sororities, the Sport Management Association, Special Olympics club on campus, Special Education department & classes, student organizations like the Council for Exceptional Children and Student Education Association and Sports Management and Recreation classes. The majority of recruitment can be done through email, word of mouth, and social media. Identifying a key student to drive recruitment and the league can be a very valuable asset. If a school utilizes an online registration tool, such as [imleagues.com](http://imleagues.com), students can register directly through this site. Typically, students interested in IM sports participation register as a team; however, in Unified Intramurals, they register as an individual and are placed on a team after assessment day.

### **Assessment Day**

Students and Special Olympics athletes are brought together the week before the start of league play for an assessment day. The day begins with a Unified Partner (or “teammate”) orientation for students wishing to participate. This orientation covers the concept, history and ideals of Unified Sports as well as some general disability/sensitivity training. At the conclusion of the orientation, all Unified Partners are given the necessary Special Olympics paperwork to become a Unified Partner. The student leaders may also wish to hand out any campus recreation paperwork that is required of sport club members. Athletes and Partners are then split into mixed groups and run through a series of drills (mostly individual skills drills with modifications if needed). Both athletes and Partners are scored by volunteers in each drill. Additionally, at the end of drills the Partners and athletes can participate in a scrimmage to see how each reacts in game situations. This event not only introduces both parties to the concept of Unified Sports, but also introduces Special Olympics athletes and Partners to each other.

### **Team Assignment**

After Assessment Day, Athletes and students are assigned to teams based on their demonstrated, sport-specific skills. This can either be done by volunteers or coaches through a draft format. A draft allows coaches to come together between the assessment day and week one of the season to select their teams. Guidelines, jointly established by Special Olympics and UREC should be in place and athletes and partners should be chosen separately.



During week one the Partners and Special Olympics athletes come together to pick their team name and receive their team uniforms; this is an exciting event for all involved.

### **Coaching**

Student volunteers can serve as the coaches for club teams. These students can be recruited during the recruitment process and run through an initial sport-specific training hosted by Special Olympics Program Staff. Coaches also must attend the assessment day. Each team can have one head coach and one assistant. Typically intramural teams do not have coaches.

### **Officiating**

The officials should be trained Intramural Officials or members of the Unified Sports Club if you are adopting a club sport model. Each official should go through the institution's standard training and be made aware of the specific Special Olympics rule changes. The UREC staff should include Unified Sports training as part of the officials' training prior to the season if including Unified Sports as part of their IM Sports offerings. Special Olympics staff can be incorporated into this training to



answer questions relating to the game management for the league and how to interact with Special Olympics athletes. The same officials should be at each week of play. Some additional training should include details on rules modifications for the sport, but also game management considerations for a Unified league. Additionally it may be required that the student officials become Class A volunteers through the Special Olympics Program. This will involve a background check and a short [Protective Behaviors](#) course. The Special Olympics Program will provide the necessary forms.

### **Game Day Registration**

Registration can be handled by the UREC IM staff or Club Sports executive board members for game day. Students present a school ID; Special Olympics athletes are allowed to give their name and information (and may also be asked to sign a waiver for participating in a program on university grounds). As standard UREC policy, the officials should handle check-in each week. The state Special



Olympics office can pull the athletes' forms prior to the assessment day to ensure all mandatory paperwork is on file and students should fill out the Unified Partner form prior to participating in the assessment day

All required paperwork can be kept electronically on a USB drive or copies can be placed into a binder that one of the sport club officers will bring to the games each week. If using an online system, such as imleagues.com, accounts for Special Olympics athletes can be created so they can be added to score sheets and online tracking.

### **Medical**

An individual who is CPR certified and a first aid kit must be present at all Unified Sports events. In case of a major injury or emergency it is always recommended that emergency services is called to the scene. Special Olympics staff should have up-to-date medical information and waivers for all athletes participating at the site of the contests. 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. Additionally, all registered athletes are covered under Special Olympics' insurance.

### **Regular Season Play**

The regular season consists of one game per week for four to six weeks, depending on the amount of teams. All teams should play each other at least once during the regular season. Special Olympics and UREC can decide the best option for providing team uniforms.

### **Championship Night**

Just like any other intramural on campus, consider hosting a Championship Night for the Unified IM league. The champion can receive a UREC champion shirt and all the recognition that comes along with that title. Other ways to add to the entertainment value are to invite other departments on campus such as athletics, Greek organizations or VIP awards presenters. Utilize on campus media and announce the teams prior to the games. Promote the Unified program utilizing scoreboards and graphics. Coaches can make paper plate awards for their teams. Club Sports programs can get together for a state extramural tournament such as the one conducted by Special Olympics New Jersey, which brings together all the collegiate club Unified teams from across the state to crown a state-wide champion.

### **Opportunities:**

Unified Sports on campus are fun for both students and Special Olympics athletes, providing a new social and sports outlet that promotes sportsmanship and participation; they provide even the most competitive students a fun way to play the game they love. Unified Sports on campus also provides



professional development and personal growth opportunities, as well as introducing potential career opportunities for student Partners interested in Special Education or Sports Management. Unified Sports on campus opens the doors for University Recreation program to introduce itself to students who may not otherwise participate in intramural or club competition. It also brings in other campus partners to the fold. Through sport, it creates friendships on and off the field – providing University Recreation departments a platform to show that their campus is unified and an inclusive and accepting place for all students and community members.

### **Challenges:**

Depending on what is offered to Special Olympics Athletes through their local area Special Olympics Program, some Athletes may find themselves with conflicting schedules for the Collegiate Unified Sports program and traditional Special Olympics leagues. The Special Olympics Program and university should work together to prevent a conflict such as this.

There are also many colleges and universities in the same geographical location who may be attracting the same athletes to their program. These universities should try to offer different sport leagues so both are able to run their programs with an ample number of athletes. On the other hand, some colleges are in a more remote location and, in these cases, Special Olympics Programs should help to guarantee enough athlete interest to field a team or an entire league.

In many cases the recreation center is funded by student funds, and it is difficult to allow non-students access and usage to the fields and indoor facilities. Typically a written agreement will be established between the recreation department and the Special Olympics Program outlining these concerns and agreeing on certain terms and conditions. For example, the student Partners involved in Unified Sports will sign in the Special Olympics athlete, giving them access to the field for the designated amount of time. Additionally in this agreement there should be discussion of the liabilities involved and if the athletes have to sign a university waiver. All Special Olympics athletes are covered by Special Olympics' insurance.

All Special Olympics athletes will have an up to date medical form, which officially registers them as an athlete. The recreation center and Special Olympics Program can come to an agreement about proper registration and screening of student partners.



## List of successful IM/Club Unified programs and contact info:

- Central Michigan University: CMU currently offers five year-round Unified IM leagues. The Unified leagues work the same way as the other intramural leagues offered on campus. Additionally each league holds a championship night where an intramural champion is crowned.
  - Central Michigan Contact: Scott George, Assistant Director Competitive Sports & Summer Camps [georg2sw@cmich.edu](mailto:georg2sw@cmich.edu) (989) 744-3689
  - Special Olympics Michigan Contact: Dan Ekonen, Director of Unified Sports Initiatives, [ekone1dk@cmich.edu](mailto:ekone1dk@cmich.edu), (989)774-7203
- University of Alabama: UA currently offers a Unified IM basketball league and additional Unified Sports opportunities throughout the year. UA has hosted numerous Unified Sports rivalry games between rival SEC schools in flag football and basketball.
  - University of Alabama contact: Brooke Turner, Assistant Director of Intramurals and Sports Clubs, [bturner13@sa.ua.edu](mailto:bturner13@sa.ua.edu), (205)348-3429
  - Special Olympics Alabama College club: Brad Gardner, President of Special Olympics Club at UA, [btgardner@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:btgardner@crimson.ua.edu), (314) 780-6525
- Rider University: Rider Unified Sports is a competitive sports club where Rider students (Unified Partners) and Special Olympics Athletes come together to play on the same team. The goal of the Rider Unified Sports club is to promote friendship and inclusion through sport. Rider currently offers soccer and basketball and competes in the state wide Special Olympics collegiate unified championship.
  - Rider Contact: Dianna Clauss, Assistant Director of Campus Life for Recreation Programs, [dclauss@rider.edu](mailto:dclauss@rider.edu) , (609) 896-5000
  - Special Olympics New Jersey contact: Kalee Baker, Director of Unified Sports, [KMB@sonj.org](mailto:KMB@sonj.org) , (609)896-8000
- University of California-Los Angeles: UCLA currently offers a Unified basketball intramural league that is ran alongside the IM basketball program.
  - UCLA Contact: Alex Prano, Competitive Sports Coordinator, [aprano@recreation.ucla.edu](mailto:aprano@recreation.ucla.edu) , (310) 206 5570
  - Special Olympics Southern California: Bill Fields, Assistant Vice President of Sports Partnerships, [bfields@sosc.org](mailto:bfields@sosc.org), (562) 502 1111