

6-25-2018


# Rowan Unified Sports: Impact on student volunteers through the lens of transformative learning

Mariah Francisco

Rowan University, mariahcisco@gmail.com

Let us know how access to this document benefits you - share your thoughts on our feedback form.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Health and Physical Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Francisco, Mariah, "Rowan Unified Sports: Impact on student volunteers through the lens of transformative learning" (2018). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2579.

<https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/2579>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact [LibraryTheses@rowan.edu](mailto:LibraryTheses@rowan.edu).

**ROWAN UNIFIED SPORTS: IMPACT ON STUDENT VOLUNTEERS  
THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

by

Mariah Francisco

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education

at

Rowan University

June 18, 2018

Thesis Chair: Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.



## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Rowan Unified Sports partners, athletes, families, and friends who have inspired me to research the impact of Unified Sports on college students. I would also like to thank them for the countless memories and growth I have experienced as a partner, coach, and now co-advisor of such an amazing organization.

I would also like to thank my family, friends, and co-workers for their continued support to pursue my passion of higher education. Without them, my journey to exploring a career in this field would be a much different experience.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Burton Sisco for his constant support and guidance throughout my graduate career.

## Abstract

Mariah C. Francisco  
ROWAN UNIFIED SPORTS: IMPACT ON STUDENT VOLUNTEERS  
THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING  
2017-2018

Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.  
Master of Arts in Higher Education

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the impact of participation with Rowan Unified Sports on student volunteers through the lens of transformative learning. Data were collected from 14 participants who were individually interviewed, answering items on demographics as well as their experience and learning through their participation with Rowan Unified Sports. Data analysis suggested evidence of transformative learning as a result of participating with Unified Sports. Participants shared changing perspectives in areas such as intellectual, social, and athletic capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants also articulated application of this understanding to their everyday life. In other words, participants translated their learning to areas outside of Unified Sports. Participants expressed understanding of diversity, inclusion, and acceptance of individuals whether or not have an intellectual disability.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iv
List of Tables .....	viii
Chapter I: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Significance of the Study .....	3
Assumptions and Limitations .....	4
Operational Definitions .....	5
Research Questions .....	6
Overview of the Study .....	6
Chapter II: Review of Literature .....	8
Special Olympics .....	8
Unified Sports .....	9
Inception .....	9
Impact of Unified Sports.....	10
Rowan Unified Sports.....	15
Transformative Learning .....	16
Frames of Reference .....	18
Transformative Learning and the Individual .....	19
Transformative Learning in Collegiate Settings .....	20
Transformative Learning and Unified Sports .....	22
Summary of the Literature Review .....	22
Chapter III: Methodology .....	23

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Context of Study .....	23
Population and Sample Size.....	23
Instrumentation .....	24
Data Collection .....	25
Data Analysis .....	26
Chapter IV: Findings.....	27
Profile of the Sample .....	27
Participant Biography Sketches .....	29
Analysis of Data.....	32
Research Question 1 .....	32
Research Question 2 .....	34
Research Question 3 .....	36
Research Question 4 .....	39
Research Question 5 .....	42
Chapter V: Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	45
Summary of the Study .....	45
Discussion of the Findings.....	46
Research Question 1 .....	46
Research Question 2 .....	47
Research Question 3 .....	47
Research Question 4 .....	49
Research Question 5 .....	50
Conclusions.....	51

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Recommendations for Practice .....	53
Recommendations for Future Research .....	53
References .....	55
Appendix A: Approval Letter from Warner .....	57
Appendix B: Warner's (2009) Interview Questions .....	59
Appendix C: Warner's (2009) Crosswalk Table .....	61
Appendix D: Approval Letter from Baker .....	65
Appendix E: Participant Recruitment .....	66
Appendix F: Informed Consent .....	67
Appendix G: Interview Protocol .....	72
Appendix H: Research Question Crosswalk Table .....	73
Appendix I: Rules and Procedures for Logic Analysis of Written Data .....	76



## List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 4.1. Demographics of Sample (N=14) .....	28
Table 4.2. Unified Sports Participation of Sample (N=14) .....	28
Table 4.3. Pseudonyms, Class Rank, Semesters Involved, and Roles of Sample (N=14).....	32
Table 4.4. Results of Content Analysis of Why Students Participate with Unified Sports.....	34
Table 4.5. Results of Content Analysis of Impact on Work or Profession.....	35
Table 4.6. Results of Content Analysis of Meaningful Experiences .....	36
Table 4.7. Results of Content Analysis of Meaningful Experiences Related to Learning .....	37
Table 4.8. Results of Content Analysis of Comments Related to Learning .....	38
Table 4.9. Results of Content Analysis of Unexpected Experiences.....	40
Table 4.10. Results of Content Analysis of Changing Misconceptions .....	41
Table 4.11. Results of Content Analysis of Impact on Perceptions.....	42
Table 4.12. Results of Content Analysis of Unexpected Experiences as Executive Board Members .....	44

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Special Olympics has afforded individuals with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to participate in athletic programs within an inclusive, educational, and encouraging environment. Unified Sports, an extension of Special Olympics, bridges the gap between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities by creating a space for the two groups to compete in sporting events such as soccer, basketball, football, swimming, and more. Rowan University's Unified Sports program functions as a sport club on campus where college students compete alongside Special Olympic Athletes in two separate seasons, soccer in the fall and basketball in the spring.

Unified Sports, a world-wide implemented program, has helped positively impact attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. Such an experience can be eye-opening regarding the talent, personalities, and capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Unified Sports benefits individuals with and without intellectual disabilities, families, friends, coaches, and community partners by creating an inclusive environment that promotes a unique learning experience.

Transformative learning is an experiential process through which individuals formulate new perspectives, appropriations, and worldviews that then impact their everyday life thereafter (Taylor, 2008). While this learning experience varies from one individual to the next, the constant among all scenarios is change. Examples of transformative experiences range from the adult learner to college and graduate students through forms such as returning to school after an extended break, a meaningful classroom experience, study abroad, or service learning. In all of these scenarios, there is

change; whether in environment, curriculum, or lifestyle. Coupled with that change is often stress or discomfort, but in these experiences, there lies a newly constructed or revised interpretation of the world or part of it (Mezirow, 1997).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Examining the topic of transformative learning and Rowan Unified Sports is two-fold. Currently, there is little research existing that analyzes the impact of Rowan Unified Sports on college participants. Worldwide studies have been done to examine the impact of various unified sports programs on many age levels. Since its inception in 2012, Unified Sports has only been examined once in 2015 on the changing attitudes of college students towards individuals with intellectual disabilities (Moylan, 2015). Because Unified Sports is a world renown program, more research is needed at Rowan University to identify the growing impact of such a unique program.

The second reason why this study took place related to examining the relationship between participation with Unified Sports and the concept of transformative learning. There is no research that connects the two. In many studies, Unified Sports is found to have positive impacts on the volunteers, coaches, and partners. That impact and process of learning has never been analyzed through the lens of transformative learning, an experience that heavily influences a change in perspective. This study aimed to fill two gaps in the knowledge base: one, the impact of Rowan Unified Sports on college partners, and two, the connection between participation with Rowan Unified Sports and transformative learning.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Overall, this study was conducted to determine the impact of participation with Rowan Unified Sports on volunteers through the lens of transformative learning. To accomplish this, there were three major purposes to this study. First, the study was conducted to identify a sample of Rowan students representative of the total population of Unified Sports volunteers. Second, the study aimed to identify additional demographics and participation levels of the students being interviewed. Lastly, this study was implemented to determine if there is evidence of a transformative learning experience among college students who participate in Unified Sports. Though the Unified Sports program has been implemented since 2012, the participants evaluated in this study were partners who currently participate with the Unified Sports program at Rowan. After setting criteria regarding levels of participation with Rowan Unified Sports, gender, and role, a select sample of students with varied ranges in the previously mentioned categories were interviewed to analyze evidence of a transformative learning experience. The group of interviewed students were analyzed to provide personal insight on their experience with Unified Sports, and their perspective on individuals with intellectual disabilities.

## **Significance of the Study**

Transformative learning experiences are often associated with adult learners, but can also be identified with undergraduate students. To have a transformative learning experience is extremely impactful for an individual because it is a very mindful process that involves a change in perspective and worldview. Such change is often associated with discomfort or stress, but leads to an everlasting effect on the individual. Unified

Sports is a unique involvement opportunity that exposes college students with individuals with intellectual disabilities in a welcoming, inclusive environment. The students that enter the program have various backgrounds in terms of knowledge, experience, and comfort levels interacting with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Since its inception in 2012, Unified Sports has grown immensely and connects Rowan students with Special Olympic Athletes and their parents, family members, and friends. While planning and implementing this sport club is important, understanding and evaluating its impact adds to the knowledge base regarding programs and initiatives that change and improve perceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities. Creating a space of inclusion and working towards a common goal breaks down the barrier between those with and without intellectual disabilities. This study helps fill the research gap that bridges involvement with Unified Sports and transformative learning.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study assumes that subjects reflected honest and accurate perspectives and viewpoints when responding to the survey and during the interview. It is also assumed that the sample is representative of students who have participated in Unified Sports over the past five years. One limitation of the study may be personal bias as a previous partner of Unified Sports and current co-advisor of the program. In addition, there may be a limitation in research bias due to the personal or advisory relationship developed with one or more subjects. Another limitation pertains to the sample size and how the sample was selected (e.g. purposive sampling using established criteria to select sample participants).

## **Operational Definitions**

1. Athlete: Individual with intellectual disabilities. Rowan Unified Sports' athletes range from age 15 to 33.
2. Coach: Can be an individual with or without intellectual disabilities. Responsible for organizing game-day substitutions and line-ups. Manages team attendance each week.
3. Frame of Reference: Structures, assumptions, and expectations that influence an individual's perspective.
4. Habit of Mind: Broad, abstract ways of thinking and feeling.
5. Intellectual Disability (ID): intellectual disability is a condition of arrest or incomplete development of the mind characterized by impairment of skills and overall intelligence in areas such as cognition, language, and motor and social abilities. Intellectual disability can occur with or without any other physical or mental disorders.
6. Partner: Individual without intellectual disabilities. Rowan undergraduate and graduate students are eligible to be a partner.
7. Point of View: Feelings, beliefs, judgements and attitudes towards individuals, groups, or environment.
8. Rowan Unified Sports: Classified Rowan University club sport overseen by the Recreation Center. Unified Sports consists of two five-week seasons, followed by a championship tournament. In the fall, the competitive sport is soccer and is played on Sundays. In the spring, the competitive sport is basketball and is played on Saturdays. At any point in the game, there must be three athletes and two partners representing each team.

9. Transformative Learning: Process of experiencing a change in perspective, interpretation, or worldview as a result of an impactful event or involvement in a specific activity.
10. Volunteer: Rowan undergraduate students who dedicate time to take on the role of either executive board member, coach, or partner. These students do not receive any type of monetary compensation.

### **Research Questions**

1. Why do students participate in Unified Sports? What do they hope to learn or gain from the experience?
2. What are the transformational learning experiences gained by participating with Unified Sports?
3. How do students describe their Unified Sports Learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or perception changing experiences?
4. How has participating with Rowan Unified Sports impacted Rowan students' perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities?
5. Does the experience of a Unified Sports Executive Board Member differ from a non-executive board member?

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter II offers a review on Special Olympics, Unified Sports, Rowan Unified Sports and Transformative Learning. The review articulates the importance and process of transformative learning and proposes a gap in the research that bridges Rowan Unified Sports and Transformative Learning.

Chapter III describes the procedures and methodology used in this study. The following details are included in this section: context of study, population and demographics, data collection instruments, data collection process, and an analysis of the data.

Chapter IV presents the findings and results of this study. This chapter will focus on the research questions and provide a content analysis of the interview data.

Chapter V summarizes and discusses the major findings of this study, as well as conclusions and recommendations for future practice and further research.



## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

#### Special Olympics

In response to the lack of athletic opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded the Special Olympics in 1968 (Haas, 2012). It was during this era that individuals with ID were often institutionalized or hidden from society. In response to the stigma and social isolation, issues arose pertaining to health care, education, and community life (Haas, 2012). Special Olympics provided an outlet for people with ID to discover a sense of belonging, as well an accepting environment to explore sporting events. Globally, over 200 million people are living with ID and they tend to be one of the most marginalized populations (Haas, 2012). Special Olympics started out sport-focused, but because of the global and societal challenges that individuals with ID face, the organization's growth occurred both on and beyond the field. Through its developing years, Special Olympics became a platform of self-advocacy, promotion of human rights, and progress for areas relating to health, community, integration, and education (Haas, 2012).

Today, Special Olympics includes four-million Special Olympic athletes throughout 170 countries (Haas, 2012). On and off the field, Special Olympics prioritizes the welfare and growth of its athletes. Beyond sports, Special Olympics focuses on the health of all athletes through several different initiatives. Through various sporting events such as trainings and competitions, Special Olympics provides the opportunity to engage in physical activity, lowering risk of noncommunicable diseases (Haas, 2012). In addition to the commitments to its athletes, Special Olympics also services family members.

Family Health Forums are planned through which important stakeholders convene and learn about relevant health issues and preventative practices (Haas, 2012). Lastly, Special Olympics provides health screenings and referrals to athletes. Over all, in addition to seeking involvement opportunities relating to sports, Special Olympics prioritizes life and assistance beyond the field.

Special Olympics also pursues avenues of research to further identify areas, rights, and services that best relate to individuals with ID. Research is vital in this organization, as it provides evidence and validates the need for services catered to individuals with ID (Haas, 2012). Aside from health and research related focuses, Special Olympics also values the empowerment of its athletes. By providing leadership programs, Special Olympics aims to build self-advocacy and confidence among the athletes. Since its induction, Special Olympics grew to serve individuals with ID both on and off the field.

### **Unified Sports**

**Inception.** While Special Olympics advocated for social change and inclusion of individuals with ID, the organization received criticism that it heightened segregations (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013). Speaking to such criticism, a visionary and supporter of Special Olympics by the name of Robert “Beau” Doherty, initiated Unified Sports in the 1980s (Siperstein, Hardman, Wappett, & Clary, 2001). Unified Sports bridges the gaps between individuals with ID, known as “athletes,” and individuals without ID, known as “partners.” While the Special Olympics World Games are exclusive to individuals with ID, Unified Sports allows athletes and partners to compete side-by-side in team sport settings (Haas, 2012).

After Doherty's inception of Unified Sports, the program saw its own growth and development, similar to that of Special Olympics as a whole. Unified Sports aimed to bring together athletes and partners, increase awareness of the spirit and skills of athletes, and also increase the self-esteem of athletes (Siperstein et al., 2001). With such goals in mind, Unified Sports needed refining and structure. In 1998, the United States Leadership Council (USLC) planned a Unified Sports Summit (Siperstein et al., 2001). The focal points of the conference were: worldwide expansion, national growth (within the U.S.), and evaluating the philosophy of Unified Sports in relation to the Special Olympics movement (Siperstein et al., 2001). From the summit, leaders were able to formulate suggestions relating to the rules of the game, eligibility criteria, training of coaches, and more (Siperstein et al., 2001). With more of a foundation established, Unified Sports was closer attaining its goals and understanding the value of various stakeholders such as the athletes, partners, coaches, and family members.

Unified Sports is now categorized in three models: Unified Sports Competitive, Unified Sports Player Development, and Unified Sports Recreation. The three models differ in age and ability levels (Haas, 2012). In the competitive branch, athletes and partners are similar in both age and ability and compete side-by-side. Player development includes athletes and partners of similar age, but various ability competing in team sports. Lastly, recreation varies in both age and ability, allowing involvement and activities to be customizable and adaptable.

**Impact of Unified Sports.** There are several stakeholders that play a key role in the success of Unified Sports programs including the athletes, partners, family members, coaches, and community members. Studies show that Unified Sports impacts each of the

stakeholders in different, and sometimes similar, ways. Overall, Unified Sports is a vehicle promoting social inclusion of individuals with ID (McConkey et al., 2013). Aside from its original goal of creating an inclusive athletic space for individuals with ID, Unified Sports resulted in additional outcomes and growth experienced by those involved with the program. Meaningful relationships, personal development, changing perceptions and more have been experienced by Unified Sports stakeholders.

***Athletes and partners.*** Unified Sports programs pride themselves in enabling athletes to develop their athletic abilities while also providing a platform to socialize with peers and develop friendships. While focus is centered on mainly the athletes, Unified Sports manages to also impact partners that are involved in the program. In a five-nation study of Unified Sports youth football and basketball, researchers identified factors that promoted social inclusion as perceived by each stakeholder. In this study, Unified Sports was found to affect athletes and partners on several levels. First, researchers found that Unified Sports promoted personal development of both athletes and partners in sporting skills and interpersonal skills, such as communication, self-esteem, and confidence (McConkey et al., 2013). In addition, athletes and partners experienced social growth in two settings. One, athletes and partners are introduced to new experiences geographically due to sporting events held in various locations (McConkey et al., 2013). The second aspect of social growth is athlete and partner engagement on and off the field. A separate study that solely examined personal development of participants in Unified Sports programs also found that athletes and partners fostered friendships off the field, mainly by attending other sporting events (Wilski, Nadolska, Dowling, McConkey & Hassan,

2012). Unified Sports aids in removing social barriers, closing the social gap between individuals with and without ID.

While athletes and partners are in some ways similarly impacted by their involvement with Unified Sports, the two populations experience separate effects that are worth noting. In a study that examined the effects of a Unified Sports youth soccer program on psycho-social attributes, athletes experienced an increase in social competence and in intentions toward social activity, including helping behaviors, sharing behaviors, physical proximity, common activities, and intimacy level (Özer, Baran, Nalbant, Aglamis & Hutzler, 2011). Athletes who participate in Unified Sports also experience a shift in focus and mindset when it comes to their role on the field. Due to the cooperative nature of team sports, athletes start to focus on their motor skills and capabilities as a team member, rather than focusing on their intellectual disability (Wilski et al., 2012). Aside from the physical aspect, athletes also experience growth in a mental aspect through improved self-confidence, self-esteem, and communication (Wilski et al., 2012). According to a National Evaluation of Unified Sports, athletes report feeling good about themselves, wanting to continue their involvement, enjoying practices, games, and teammates, and enhancing their skills (Siperstein et al., 2001). One of the only criticism that athletes reported was not having enough playing time (Siperstein et al., 2001). Overall, athletes who participate in Unified Sports experience personal growth and community inclusion.

Partners experience a set of specific effects as a result of their involvement with Unified Sports. A recent study aimed to describe factors that motivated individuals to volunteer with people with ID, and also how their volunteer experience impacted their

comfort levels and attitudes towards people with ID. After using the *Volunteer Function Inventory* (VFI), a set of 30 statements used to rank volunteer motivations among six dimensions, the primary motivators identified were values (importance in helping others), understanding (gaining insight by first-hand experience), and enhancement (increasing self-esteem) (Collier, Rothwell, Vanzo, & Carbone, 2015). This same study found that volunteers improved or maintained (and did not worsen) comfort level and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (Collier et al., 2015). In the previously mentioned five-nation study, partners, after having been involved with Unified Sports, reported positive perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities due to increased education and understanding through direct personal contact (McConkey et al., 2013). Furthermore, in one of the few studies that examines Unified Sports in a college setting, partners that engaged in a six-week, four session swimming program with Special Olympic athletes experienced a greater comfort level with individuals with ID, discovered how “normal” Special Olympic athletes are, and experienced enjoyment (Sullivan & Glidden, 2014). Engaging with athletes in a sports setting has certainly dispelled the myths and stigmas that partners have had regarding individuals with ID. In the nationwide evaluation, partners reported feeling good about themselves, enjoying time with teammates, getting along with fellow athletes and partners, and increasing understanding of individuals with ID (Siperstein et al., 2001). While Unified Sports was created with social inclusion in mind, the program subsequently impacts partners as well.

***Families, coaches, and community partners.*** Unified Sports directs its spotlight on athletes and partners by creating an inclusive space to engage in athletic programs, as well as extracurricular social events. While the main focus is on these two groups, there

are other stakeholders that are undoubtedly impacted by the program as well. Family members report high satisfaction rates with Unified Sports programs and would highly recommend to a friend (Siperstein et al., 2001). Family members, while maybe not as directly impacted as athletes and partners, notice improvements and changes in their loved ones. Family members saw improvement in physical abilities, self-esteem, self-confidence, and relations with fellow athletes (Siperstein et al., 2001). Furthermore, family members saw improvements in adaptive behaviors and relations with peers at work or school, parents, siblings, and even other adults (Siperstein et al., 2001). When the family members asked what part they most liked about Unified Sports, a majority answered with the social aspect and its impact on the athletes' lives on and off the field (Siperstein et al., 2001). Unified Sports has a positive impact on its coaches. From the national study, a majority of the coaches report participating with Unified Sports mainly for personal satisfaction (Siperstein et al., 2001). Similar to the family members, while coaches are not necessarily directly impacted by Unified Sports, they serve as a key role in the nature of the game. Coaches create an inclusive and safe environment for athletes and partners by prioritizing self-esteem, confidence, and fun throughout games and practices (Siperstein et al., 2001). The final stakeholder worth discussing is community partners. Schools become the number one source of recruitment for Unified Sports involvement (McConkey et al., 2013). In addition, community sponsoring organizations offer 'in-kind' support in terms of access to facilities, supply of equipment, or a platform for marketing (McConkey et al., 2013). Community partners have also offered job opportunities to athletes. Athletes and partners benefit greatly from the Unified Sports

program. It is clear, however, that so do fellow stakeholders, including family members, coaches, and community partners in areas such as satisfaction and partnerships.

**Rowan Unified Sports.** Rowan University was one of the first institutions on the East Coast and the first college in New Jersey to implement a Unified Sports program. Unified Sports takes on different forms depending on the college or university. At Rowan, Unified Sports is classified as a Sport Club, funded through the Recreation Center. Unified Sports was introduced to Rowan in the beginning of 2012 by Gary Baker, the Assistant Director of Sport Clubs and Youth Programs at the time. Since then, Unified Sports now has close to 200 participants, including partners, athletes, coaches, and volunteers. At Rowan, college students compete alongside Special Olympic athletes. In the fall, the organization plans Unified Soccer. In the spring, the organization plans Unified Basketball. A registration process takes place for both Rowan's students and the athletes. Prior to each season, the Unified Sports Executive Board hosts assessment dates at which both partners and athletes participate in a series of skills tests to identify the various abilities of all participants. Once assessments have been completed, and teams are created based on a balance of skill and ability. The teams play once per weekend for five or six weeks, leading up to a tournament that will identify the three best teams in the league. For both the soccer and basketball seasons, the winning team represents Rowan in a state-wide tournament. If successful, the team then participates in a nationwide tournament. The Unified Sports program at Rowan has grown in popularity and success since its inaugural seasons in 2012 (Moylan, 2015).



## **Transformative Learning**

Part of adulthood is establishing a base knowledge and understanding of the world. A skill, and arguably a necessity, that becomes essential to adulthood is the ability to identify change around us and seek better ways to understand the world (Taylor, 2008). Exploration, learning, and identification of change are all imperative to the adult learning process (Taylor, 2008). The transformational learning theory explains this learning process and appropriating new interpretations of meaning in the world (Taylor, 2008). Adulthood is filled with new experiences and events that constantly challenge our understanding. As an adult, reflecting and reframing prior beliefs, values, feelings, and meanings promotes development and understanding.

The theory of transformative learning was first examined by Jack Mezirow in 1978 in his study about women who were returning to postsecondary education after taking an extended hiatus from their educational experiences (Kitchenham, 2008). From this study, Mezirow concluded that the participants experienced “personal transformation” and defined what is now understood as the 10 phases of transformative learning. From the time of this first study, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning saw many revisions, additions, and edits. During his early construction of the theory, Mezirow was heavily influenced by Kuhn’s paradigm, Freire’s conscientization, and Habermas’s domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008). Kuhn’s paradigms inspired Mezirow’s concept regarding frames of reference and the idea of perspective transformation. Freire’s model of conscientization, referring to understanding social, political, and economic contradictions to then act upon oppressive forces, encompassed three levels of consciousness growth (Kitchenham, 2008). The third and highest level was

the ability to think holistically and critically of one's surroundings and then take action to elicit change. This level inspired critical reflection, one of the key elements of transformative learning. Finally, Mezirow adopted Habermas's three domains of learning (technical, practical, and emancipatory), to define perspective transformation (Kitchenham, 2008). While Mezirow's theory of transformative learning saw several changes, one of the most noteworthy evolutions was defining the four ways of learning. At first, there were only three ways of learning: learning within meaning schemes (learners work with their existing knowledge and expand, complement, and revise current information), learning new meaning schemes (new schemes compatible with existing schemes), and learning through meaning transformation (encountering a problem that cannot be solved with current scheme and learner must learn new meaning schemas) (Kitchenham, 2008). The fourth way of learning was added almost 20 years later which was transforming points of view. Throughout its evolution, however, transformative learning has been best understood and studied among adult learners and their experiences.

Transformative learning is formally understood as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 162). This shift in interpretation is best described by frames of reference. Frames of reference refer to structures, assumptions, and expectations that represent an individual's perspective and ultimately influence personal thinking, beliefs, and action (Taylor, 2008). Transformation occurs when a situation challenges the individual to revise a frame of reference leading to a more fully developed frame of reference (Taylor, 2008). The situations that cause

reframing are often coupled with stress or discomfort. Often, individuals must reflect on their current beliefs and understanding to then be able to expand their frame to a greater concept. Evidently, transformative learning is greatly influential in the adult learner and their life experiences. These frames of reference not only shape individuals, but also allow them to learn, grow, and transform in accordance with life's constant change.

**Frames of reference.** As previously mentioned, frames of reference allow adults to define their life world that set an individual's line of action. To best understand transformative learning, it is important to grasp the definition, application, and complexity of a frame of reference. A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are broad, abstract ways of thinking and feeling influenced by cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological factors (Mezirow, 1997). Points of view result from habits of mind. Simply put, the way one thinks impacts the way one feels. A person's point of view encompasses the feelings, beliefs, judgements and attitudes towards individuals, groups, and the surrounding environment (Mezirow, 1997).

Because frames of reference shape the adult's perception of the world around them, it is important to understand what influences a frame of reference. The two main factors are cultural assimilation and the influences of primary caregivers (Mezirow, 1997). Nature and nurture are two more familiar terms that describe what impacts a frame of reference. An adult who lives in lower class urban settings will have different frames of references than an adult who lives in upper class suburban neighborhoods solely based on the environment in which they grew up. Nature has a powerful influence on habit of mind and point of view. Likewise, a wide range of diversity exists among parents or

guardians and the manner in which they raise their children. The result is differing frames of reference that they pass along to their kin.

Within a frame of reference, points of view are more subject to change than the habit of mind (Mezirow, 1997). Adults are more aware and in control of their point of view. Changing a point of view is influenced by the process of solving problems and modifying assumptions. This ability is more accessible than altering the habit of mind. One can easily trim the branches of a tree, but it is much more difficult to extract its roots. Analogous to a tree, a person can adjust their point of view, but changing their core, their habit of mind, requires more effort.

**Transformative learning and the individual.** Transformative learning differs from one individual to the next. As explained earlier, the habit of mind and point of view of each individual is shaped by the environment and people that an adult closely identifies with. Because transformative learning is often coupled with stressful or life-altering events, there are many emotions reported to accompany such an experience. As adult learners share their story's, joy, fear, and exhilaration are common themes as the mind, body, and spirit intersect (Cranton, 2006). It makes sense that these are the emotions that align with transformative experiences. When adults encounter a challenge or life event that causes them to stop, think, reflect, and alter their understanding of their world view, this can be a powerful shift.

The duration of transformation learning varies from one learner to the next. Transformation has occurred suddenly and dramatically, gradually over time, or as a developmental process (Cranton, 2006). Even though each learner has a different story to tell, research states that transformational learning most often occurs gradually (Cranton,

2006). Gradual experiences are indicative of ordinary experiences that lead to a deep shift in thinking (Cranton, 2006). While transformational learning can be a result of a stressful influencer, Mezirow acknowledges that transformation leads to perspectives that are more open and better justified. Each learner experience is different, but the final improvement and broadening of thinking is seemingly the predicted common outcome.

**Transformative learning in collegiate settings.** While the theory of transformative learning is often applied to adult learners, studies show that college undergraduate and graduate students also engage in experiences that promote transformative learning. Many studies focus on transformative learning in the context of classroom settings, study abroad, service learning, or field experience. One study identified six themes that foster Mezirow's transformative learning theory in the classroom. These themes included: providing in-depth shared experiences, fostering group ownership, awareness of personal and social contextual influences, course content influenced by personal opinion, critical reflection and affective learning, and sufficient time (Taylor, 2000). Other classroom characteristics that promote a transformative learning experience as cited by Sohn and others (2016) include: trustful relationships, deep personal meaning, connections to prior learning, and a comfortable learning environment. The final characteristic listed has received some criticism because some believe that discomfort leads to growth in learning (Sohn et al., 2016). This particular study examined doctoral students in an elective course in existential phenomenology. The course had a reputation of "changing student's lives." The professor had an open grade and assignment structure, followed a humanistic approach of teaching, explored content, reflection, and relationships, as well as emotional and rational perceptions (Sohn et al.,

2016). Students who took the course often used words such as free, open, and collaborative to describe its nature. At the end of the course, students felt they learned a different way of viewing the world (Sohn et al., 2016). With the proper conditions, transformative learning can be promoted in the classroom.

Along with the classroom experience, transformative learning can also take place through service learning, fieldwork, and study abroad. These are the most common areas through which transformative learning is examined. In service learning and study abroad experiences, students are often placed in environments that are unfamiliar and new. In one study, recent graduates who studied psychology took a gap year and spent time in South Africa engaging with local communities and managing town projects. The students engaged in reflective journaling, problem based learning, teaching, and research throughout their time. After first hand experiences, the students reported having an increased understanding of foreign cultures and realized the vast difference between textbook learning and community learning (Isaacs, Rose, & Davids, 2016). In another study, undergraduate students conducted fieldwork in Barcelona, Spain exploring locality, gaining a sense of place, experiencing active learning, and engaging in independent and advanced research (Simm & Marvell, 2015). Again, through first-hand experience coupled with changing of emotions and comfort levels, students reported having a transformative learning experience (Simm & Marvell, 2015). Common threads in these studies are first-hand experience, discomfort, and increased understanding of the world.

## **Transformative Learning and Unified Sports**

Transformative learning is often associated with adult learners, but has been shown to exist among college students, both among undergraduate and graduate levels. Because the transformative experience is dependent upon the individual, is often accompanied by discomfort, and is influenced by first-hand experience of unfamiliar, new settings, Unified Sports can arguably be classified as a transformative experience by athletes and partners. Transformational learning is described as changes in frames of reference, which is composed of habits of mind and points of view

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

Transformative learning is a unique experience that impacts an individual's worldview or perspective on a specific matter. The two components of transformative learning are experience and changing perspective. Rowan Unified Sports offers an opportunity for college students to interact, bond, and compete with Special Olympic athletes, individuals with ID. Such an experience can lead to a changing perspective or attitude on individuals with ID. While studies have shown the positive impacts of involvement with Unified Sports, none so far have connected Unified Sports to transformative learning theory. More research is needed on the impact of involvement with Rowan Unified Sports on the attitudes towards individuals with ID in the context of transformational learning. Such research is fundamental to expanding the knowledge base and impact of Unified Sports on its participants.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Context of Study**

The study was conducted at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan is a Carnegie-classified doctoral research institution with 18,484 students enrolled (15,401 undergraduates, 2,045 graduates), according to data from 2017-2018. The student to faculty ration on campus is 17:1, with an average class size of 20 students. In the classroom, all courses are taught by professors and does not use teaching assistants. Rowan offers over 150 degree offering programs among its 12 different colleges and schools. In addition, Rowan offers over 200 study abroad programs in 40 different countries. Aside from the academic experience, this institution offers an array extracurricular activities. There are 146 total clubs and organizations (115 campus clubs and organizations and 31 Greek organizations). Rowan has eight men's and ten women's varsity sports, competing within the NCAA Division III. Aside from varsity sports, Rowan has 47 intramural sport activities per year and 38 organized club sports (Fast Facts).

#### **Population and Sample Size**

The target population was the Rowan Unified Sports undergraduate volunteers who are currently participating in the program, 116 volunteers, 71 females and 45 males, ranging from different academic class statuses from freshman to graduate student. A maximum variation/heterogeneous purposive sampling strategy was used to narrow down the target population. A total of 14 Unified Sports volunteers were selected, eight females and six males. The male to female ratio was selected to reflect the overall target



population. The first seven were selected based on their position on the Unified Sports Executive Board. All members of the executive board were invited to participate in the interview. Since the executive board contained four males and three females, by subtraction an additional two males and five females were recruited to maintain the target population ratio. The next limiting factor was whether volunteers had participated in at least two semesters as a Unified Sports volunteer. If volunteers did not participate in greater or equal to two semesters as a Unified Sports volunteer, they were not invited to participate in the study. The executive board members were e-mailed and invited to participate in the study based on their roles with Unified Sports. A call for participants was conducted electronically to all current Unified Sports partners to participate in the study, if they have participated with Rowan Unified Sports for at least two semesters. This sample was very specific so as to reflect the male to female ratio of the target population, include the executive board members, and select students who have had a sufficient amount of time with Unified Sports to have had been impacted by the program.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative research, particularly in the form of open-ended interviews provides in-depth information pertaining to an individual's perspective and view point on a particular topic (Turner, 2010). Understanding and studying the transformative learning experience has been researched both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this study, a qualitative instrument was used based off of a qualitative study that examined student's learning through study abroad. Warner (2009) examined adult learners and created an instrument based off adult and transformational learning theories and best practices in previous research. Warner (2009) specifically used open-ended questions so that

interview participants could truly reconstruct his or her experiences. The theory of transformative learning has not yet been connected to participation with Unified Sports. As a result, the questions regarding the study abroad experience were adjusted to reflect participation with Unified Sports. To ensure that the interview questions were clear and understandable, I held mock interviews with external volunteers prior to conducting the interviews for my data collection. The original interview questions and crosswalk table have been included in Appendixes B and C. The adjusted interview questions and crosswalk table have also been included in Appendixes G and H. Each question used in the interview tied to at least one of the research questions, as indicated by the crosswalk table. Prior to asking these questions, the interviewees were asked demographical questions. This study was confidential due to the nature of the individual interview.

### **Data Collection**

The executive board members were first introduced to the idea of participation in this research study at one of their Unified Sports Executive Board meetings in the fall semester. Before formally recruiting participants, I attained approval from Gary Baker, Advisor of Unified Sports. This approval letter is found in Appendix D. These seven members were then formally invited via e-mail to participate in an individual interview. This e-mail reflected the purpose of the study, and reiterated the volunteer and consent aspect of participation. The 116 non-executive board members received an introductory e-mail about the study and invited them to respond if they were willing to participate in individual interviews. Participants were recruited via email. This recruitment message is found in Appendix E. Since a certain number of females and males were needed, I

selected the first five females and the first two males who responded to the initial e-mail as the remaining participants of the individual interview.

The individual interviews followed a semi-structured, open-ended design (Turner, 2010). The interviewees were asked to answer demographical questions first, and then the same 8 open-ended questions related to their Unified Sports experience.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed. Content analysis was used for analysis (Sisco, 1981). Units of data were determined by finding phrases or descriptors in the interviews. Unessential words were omitted and incorrect syntax was edited. The data were then examined for convergent and divergent themes. I then determined the frequency of descriptors for each theme. Verbatim quotes were used to illustrate each theme (Sisco, 1981). The rules and procedures for content analysis is found in Appendix I. The research questions were addressed through this content analysis to better understand the experiences of students who participate with the Unified Sports program.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

#### Profile of the Sample

The participants in this study were selected through a maximum variation heterogeneous purposive sampling strategy to represent the total 116 volunteers. One interview was conducted with each of the 14 participants throughout the spring 2018 semester. Eight of the participants were female and six were male. Seven of the participants were on the Unified Executive Board and the remaining seven have participated in the Rowan Unified Sports program as either a coach, volunteer, or partner. Table 4.1 summarizes the participants' demographic data. Table 4.2 summarizes the number of semesters and roles of each participant.

Table 4.1

*Demographics of Sample (N=14)*

Category	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	6	43%
Female	8	57%
<b>Academic Standing</b>		
Freshmen	2	14%
Sophomores	1	7%
Juniors	7	50%
Seniors	4	29%
<b>College</b>		
College of Business	4	24%
Communication and Creative Arts	0	0%
Education	5	29%
Humanities and Social Sciences	2	12%
Performing Arts	2	12%
Science and Math	4	24%
Earth and Environment	0	0%
Health Professions	0	0%

Table 4.2

*Unified Sports Participation of Sample (N=14)*

Category	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Semesters Involved</b>		
2	5	36%
4	4	29%
5	2	7%
6	3	21%
7	1	7%
<b>Volunteer Roles</b>		
Executive Board Member	7	24%
Partner	13	45%
Coach	9	31%

## **Participant Biography Sketches**

The following is a brief biography of each of the 14 participants who were interviewed in this study.

Abby is junior within the College of Science and Math. She has been participating with Unified Sports for six semesters now. Abby has served on the executive board and as a coach throughout her time with the program. Abby has a family member who has intellectual disabilities.

Barbara is a senior within the College of Education and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. She has participated for four semesters with Unified Sports as both a coach and a partner. She had minimal interactions with individuals with intellectual disabilities prior to her experience with Unified Sports.

Brad is a freshman within the College of Business and has participated with Unified Sports for two semesters. He has experience as both a partner and a coach. Brad has had extensive prior experience with Special Olympics New Jersey. He also has a family friend who falls within the autism spectrum.

Christi is a junior whose major falls under the College of Business. She has participated with Unified Sports as a partner for two total semesters. Christi has a family member who has intellectual disabilities. Through this relationship, Christi has personal experience interacting with individuals with intellectual disabilities. She has also participated in athletic activities with individuals with intellectual disabilities before Unified Sports.

Ellie is a junior who belongs to both the College of Education and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. She has participated with Unified Sports for six

semesters now. She serves on the executive board and has also been a partner and coach. She has had prior involvement with individuals with intellectual disabilities through elementary and high school programs.

Jayden is a junior within the College of Education. He has participated with Unified Sports for four semesters. He is an executive board member and has held partner and volunteer roles. He has a close family member who has intellectual disabilities.

Joy is a freshman whose major falls within the College of Education. She has been a part of Rowan Unified Sports for two semesters. She has been both a partner and a coach. Joy has a close family member who has intellectual disabilities. Through this relationship, Joy has been to Special Olympics events before.

Laurel is a senior within the Colleges of Education and Science and Math. She has participated with Unified Sports for seven semesters. She serves on the executive board, but also held roles as a partner and a coach. Laurel has a family member who falls within the autism spectrum.

Lisa is a senior within the College of Science and Math. She has participated as a partner within Unified Sports for two semesters. Lisa has family members who have intellectual disabilities. She has also participated in college programs outside of Unified Sports that have afforded her the opportunity to work with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Mario is a junior within the College of Engineering. He has participated with Unified Sports for six semesters. He serves on the executive board, but also has been a partner, coach, and volunteer. Mario had a family member who had intellectual

disabilities. Through this relationship, Mario learn about individuals with intellectual disabilities at an early age.

Ryan is a junior within the College of Engineering. He has been with Unified Sports for six semesters now. He has been a volunteer, partner, and a coach. Prior to his participation with Unified Sports, Ryan has never interacted with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Taylor is a junior whose major falls within the College of Business. She has been involved with Unified Sports for two semesters, both as a partner. Prior to her participation with Unified Sports, Taylor was part of a program in elementary school that allowed her to interact with students with special needs.

Tom is a sophomore within the College of Business. He has participated in Unified Sports for four semesters. He serves on the executive board and has participated as a partner. Tom has a family member who has intellectual disabilities. From a young age, Tom was taught about individuals with intellectual disabilities through family gatherings and interactions.

Troy is a senior graduating from the College of Science and Math. He has participated with Unified Sports for four semesters. He served on the executive board and also played roles as a partner, volunteer, and coach. While Troy's major opened an opportunity his freshman year for him to interact with individuals with intellectual disabilities, Unified Sports was his first immersive experience involving individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Table 4.3 shows the pseudonyms, class rank, semesters involved, and roles of each of the 14 participants.



Table 4.3

*Pseudonyms, Class Rank, Semesters Involved, and Roles of Sample (N=14)*

Pseudonym	Class Rank	Semesters Involved	Roles
Abby	Junior	6	E-board, coach
Barbara	Senior	4	Coach, partner
Brad	Freshman	2	Coach, partner
Christi	Junior	2	Partner
Ellie	Junior	6	E-board, coach, partner
Jayden	Junior	4	E-board, coach, partner
Joy	Freshman	2	Coach, partner
Laurel	Senior	7	E-board, coach, partner
Lisa	Senior	2	Partner
Mario	Junior	5	E-board, coach, partner
Ryan	Junior	6	Coach, partner
Taylor	Junior	2	Partner
Tom	Sophomore	4	E-board, partner
Troy	Senior	4	E-board, coach, partner

### Analysis of the Data

**Research question 1.** Why do students get involved with Unified Sports? What do they hope to learn or gain from the experience?

Content analysis was used to determine why students participated with Unified Sports and what they hoped to gain from the experience. To address this question, participants were asked to speak about what motivated them to participate with Unified Sports. The following breaks down the question asked about motivation followed by the content analysis.

“Tell me about what has motivated you to participate with Unified Sports.” There were three themes that emerged from the responses to this question. The first theme was a family member. Participants specified using phrases such as brother, cousin, or grandma’s sister. The second theme was prior experience. Participants described

experiences in elementary or high school programs, camps involving kids with special needs, or volunteering with Special Olympics. The third theme was atmosphere. Participants used words or phrases such as fun, positive, accepting, good, and happy. Interestingly enough, Tom combined the second and third themes in his response. He mentioned being part of a club in high school that interacted with individuals with autism and stated, “I wanted to join a club similar to that when I came to college and Unified is very similar. That is initially made me want to join. And then, I saw the atmosphere and how friendly and warm the environment was, and that made me want to continue my involvement.” Outside of some of these themes, students like Barbara and Taylor got involved with Unified Sports after being bystanders in the surrounding area. Both were intrigued by witnessing the games and sought out the opportunity to get involved.

Table 4.4

*Results of Content Analysis of Why Students Participate with Unified Sports*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Family</b>		
Sibling	4	1
Cousin	2	3
Member (did not specify)	2	3
<b>Prior Experience</b>		
Special Olympics	3	2
Elementary, Intermediate, or High School	4	1
Volunteer Program	3	2
<b>Atmosphere</b>	2	3
Fun	2	3
Positive	1	4
Accepting	1	4
Happy	2	3
Good	1	4
Joy	2	3
Friendly	1	4
Warm		

**Research question 2.** What are the transformational learning experiences gained by being involved with Unified Sports?

Content analysis was used in order to identify the students' experiences that influenced transformative learning. During the interview process, participants were asked how this experience may impact their job or profession and asked to talk about their more meaningful experiences during their time with Unified Sports. The following breaks down each question and the content analysis for each interview question.

“How do you see this experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?” There were two major themes that arose from the participants' responses.

The first theme was developing people skills. Participants described experiences working

with different types of people and communication. Ellie and Mario both spoke specifically about communicating with family members and caretakers of the athletes. The second theme was diversity awareness. Participants used words and phrases such as unique background, acceptance, and understanding.

Table 4.5

*Results of Content Analysis of Impact on Work or Profession*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Developing people skills</b>		
Working with different types of people	6	1
Communication skills	2	2
<b>Diversity awareness</b>		
Unique background	1	3
Acceptance	1	3
Understanding	1	3

“Tell me about your more meaningful experiences during your experience with Unified Sports.” There were three themes that emerged from the responses to this question. The first theme was relationships with athletes. Participants used words and phrases such as close, personal connections, outside of Unified, and social media. Building friendships with the athletes was certainly a prominent theme throughout the interviews. One student, however, presented a contrasting perspective. Mario stated that his most meaningful interactions have been with parents of the athletes. Parents have expressed immense gratitude to Mario. He described parents’ gratitude as them saying, “Thank you for making my life better because you make the person’s life I care about better.” The second theme was coaching. Participants described witnessing partners

facilitate the success of athletes, having a sense of ownership, and feeling like a role model. The third theme was games. Within this theme, participants recalled instances during a soccer or basketball game. Participants used words or phrases such as “scored a beautiful shot,” championship game, “scored her first goal,” teamwork, sportsmanship, and win.

Table 4.6

*Results of Content Analysis of Meaningful Experiences*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Relationships</b>		
Close	2	2
Outside of Unified	3	1
Good	1	3
Social media	1	3
Personal connections	1	3
Support	1	3
<b>Coaching</b>		
Facilitate the success of athletes	1	3
Look up to you	1	3
Leading team	1	3
<b>Game</b>		
Scored a goal (athlete)	2	2
Championship game	1	3
Teamwork	1	3
Sportsmanship	1	3
Win	2	2

**Research question 3.** How do students describe their Unified Sports learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or perception changing experiences?

Content analysis was used to identify how participants described their Unified Sports learning process. Participants were asked to speak about meaningful experiences and to provide any additional comments about their time with Unified Sports. The

following breaks down questions related to how students describe their learning and the content analysis for each question.

“Tell me about your more meaningful experiences during your experience with Unified Sports.” There were two major themes that emerged from this question relating to describing a learning experience. The first theme was realization. Participants used specific phrases such as eye-opening, opened my mind, and clicked. The second theme was positivity. Participants used words such as touching, moved, happy, special, and motivating. For example, Barbara expressed, “I think that Unified provides these basic, human connection moments that are so touching and profound.”

Table 4.7

*Results of Content Analysis of Meaningful Experiences Related to Learning*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Realization</b>		
Eye-opening	3	1
Opened my mind	2	2
Clicked	3	1
<b>Positivity</b>		
Moved	1	3
Happy	1	3
Special	1	3
Motivating	1	3

“Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your experiences while participating with Unified Sports?” There were two themes that arose from the responses in relation to describing learning. The first theme was unexpected. Participants used phrases such as I did not expect or I did not think. Participants typically

followed up with the extent to which they loved the program, the size of the program, and growth of interest. The second theme was unifying. Participants used phrases like everyone comes together, brings people together, or organizations from all over. Tom was the only participant to describe his learning in comparison to other clubs, and also learning over time. Tom stated:

It's just been a very positive experience and I've been able to learn a lot from it. With some involvements that individuals are involved in, they just get involved, they'll learn from the first semester, and then it'll just kind of plateau from there. But what I find interesting with Unified Sports is that every semester that I'm involved, I seem to be learning more and more. It's like a steady growth and I feel like I am getting a lot of learning experiences that will help me in the future.

Other participants just described the learning experience itself, rather than the extent and longevity of learning.

Table 4.8

*Results of Content Analysis of Comments Related to Learning*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Unexpected</b>		
I didn't expect	3	2
I did not think	4	1
<b>Unifying</b>		
Everyone comes together	2	3
Different backgrounds	1	4
Organizations all over campus	1	4

**Research question 4.** How has participating with Unified Sports impacted Rowan student's perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities?

Content analysis was used to determine how participating with Unified Sports has impacted students' perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants were asked questions about what has been unexpected about their time with unified sports and how this experience has impacted their thoughts and perceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities. The following breaks down questions about students' perceptions and the content analysis for each question.

“What experiences have been unexpected during your participation with Unified Sports?” One theme emerged from this question relation to perceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities. The theme was awareness. Participants described awareness regarding the athletes' intellectual capabilities and about the lifestyles of those with intellectual disabilities. For example, Christi reflects, “I think it's funny the things that they say all the time. It's hilarious, the connections they can make. They surprise you all the time.” In similar fashion, Taylor mentioned, “I didn't expect how forward they can be. If you miss one game, they'll remember and ask you where you were the previous week.”



Table 4.9

*Results of Content Analysis of Unexpected Experiences*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Awareness</b>		
Connections they make	2	1
Lack of programs	1	2
Community support	1	2
How forward they can be	1	2

“Do you feel you’ve had misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities?” There were three themes that emerged relating to changing perceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities. The first theme was characteristics. Participants spoke about the athletes’ competitive, social, and athletic skills. The second theme was individualism. When responded to this question, participants reflected on ideas such as everyone is unique, athletes’ thoughts and feelings are valid, and they can be successful. The final theme was typecasting. Participants used words like generalize, associate, and categorize. Out of the 14 participants, however, Abby, Brad, Jayden, Lisa, and Taylor all said they did not have any misconceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Table 4.10

*Results of Content Analysis of Changing Misconceptions*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Characteristics (of athletes)</b>		
Competitive	1	3
Social Skills	1	3
Athletic	1	3
<b>Individualism</b>		
Everyone is unique	2	2
Thoughts and feelings are valid	1	3
Can be successful too	1	3
<b>Typcasting</b>		
Categorize	1	3
Associate	1	3
Generalize	3	1

“How has this experience impacted your thoughts and perceptions related to individuals with intellectual disabilities?” There were three themes that arose from this question. The first was, similar to the previous question, characteristics. Participants used phrases like intellectual capabilities, social skills, and athletic. The second theme was equality. Participants used words and phrases like treated the same, deserve the same chances, just like us, and “don’t judge.” Contrasting to this theme, Christi mentioned a motto that she was taught at a young age. Christi recalled the phrase, “Different, not less.” The final theme was range. Three participants mentioned learning more about the autism spectrum and not realizing the range that individuals with intellectual disabilities could fall under. Mario stated, “Intellectual disabilities is almost too broad of a term because everyone’s situation is different. What ‘intellectual disabilities’ means to one person and what it means to someone else can be similar, but also so different.” Divergent from these three themes, however, was something Joy said. Joy mentioned, “I

think it (my experience) has (impacted my thoughts and perceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities). I don't really know why though, but it definitely has." Joy could not place or describe how this experience has impacted her perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Table 4.11

*Results of Content Analysis of Impact on Perceptions*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Characteristics (of athletes)</b>		
Intellectual capabilities	3	1
Social skills	2	2
Athletic	2	2
<b>Equality</b>		
Treated the same	2	2
Deserve the same chances	1	3
Just like us	2	2
Don't judge	1	3
<b>Range</b>		
Spectrum	3	1

**Research question 5.** Does the experience of a Unified Sports Executive Board member differ from a non-executive board member?

Content analysis was used to determine if the seven Unified Sports executive board members had a different experience than the seven students who do not serve on the executive board. Participants were not asked to speak specifically on their experience on or off the executive board. The executive board members, however, naturally brought up unique experiences as a result of being on the executive board when asked about how this experience relates to their work or profession as well as when asked about what has

been unexpected about the Unified Sports experience. The following breaks down those two questions and the content analysis for each question.

“How do you see this experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?” Mario and Ellie, both members of the executive board, spoke to the ability to communicate with the parent’s of the athletes and how those experiences translate to their everyday life. Mario stated:

Going into the field (of engineering), I am going to be a 20-22-year-old working in the field with people who are in their 40s and I have to be comfortable talking to them. I think talking to these parents who are sometimes mad at me (for making decisions based on the betterment of the program) helps me have those critical conversations. I am not necessarily afraid of people or adults as I normally would be.

Ellie spoke to communicating with parents and family members as well. Ellie is interested in careers in Special Education. Ellie stated:

I think it (experience with Unified Sports) helps with communication skills, especially with family members of individuals with intellectual disabilities. It (experience with Unified Sports) opens up your mind to how to deal with the whole aspect and lifestyle of someone how has a disability.

Students who are not on the executive board did not speak to communication with parents and family members to the extent of Mario and Ellie’s experience.

“What experiences have been unexpected during your participation with Unified Sports?” There were two major themes that arose from this question, unique to the perspective of executive board members. The first theme was responsibility. Participants

used words or phrases such as behind the scenes, how much work, or how involved. The second theme was program growth. Participants used words or phrases such as how much the program has grown or student interest.

Table 4.12

*Results of Content Analysis of Unexpected Experiences as Executive Board Members*

Theme	<i>f</i>	Rank Order
<b>Responsibility</b>		
I had to be organized	1	3
Hands on	2	2
Amount of work	3	1
Behind the scenes	1	3
How involved	2	2
<b>Program growth</b>		
How program has grown	2	2
Student interest	1	3

## Chapter V

### Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary of the Study

This thesis investigated the impact of participation with Unified Sports on student volunteers through the lens of transformative learning. The study aimed to identify what motivated students to participate with Unified Sports. Also probed was if student volunteers had changing perspectives on individuals with intellectual disabilities. Lastly, the study aimed to compare the experiences of students who are involved with the executive board versus student volunteers who are not on the executive board. Fourteen participants took part in the study. The first seven were members of the current Unified Sports executive board. Of the seven executive board members, three were female and four were male. The remaining seven were recruited from the general Unified Sports volunteer population. Students were invited to participate in the study if they had completed at least two semesters of participating with Unified Sports. The first five females and two males to respond were selected as the remaining seven participants to reflect the female to male ratio of the entire population of volunteers.

Each participant took part in an individual interview during the spring 2018 semester. The interviews took place on Rowan University's Glassboro campus in either the Chamberlain Student Center or Savitz Hall. The interview protocol focused on motivation for participating with Unified Sports, past and present experience working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, and past and present perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. In order to analyze the data, content analysis was used to code the transcribed

interviews. Content analysis provided descriptors and themes that emerged from the responses. The frequency of the themes and descriptors was presented in table form. Direct quotes from participant interviews were used to support themes, illustrate experiences, and provide examples.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

**Research question 1.** Why do students get involved with Unified Sports? What do they hope to learn or gain from the experience?

The participants discussed three motivations for participating with Unified Sports: family, prior experience, and the atmosphere. Eight of the 14 participants shared having either a sibling, cousin, or family member who has intellectual disabilities. In addition to a personal tie to individuals with intellectual disabilities, having prior experience was mentioned in 10 instances throughout the interviews. Having an understanding or first-hand experience of working with individuals with intellectual disabilities is a strong motivator to get involved with Unified Sports. This is consistent with Collier and others (2015) who determined volunteers are primarily motivated to participate with programs such as Unified Sports because of understanding and first-hand experience. Participants described the atmosphere as a motivator to stay involved with Unified Sports. The environment was described in positive, uplifting terms. This is also consistent with Collier and others (2015) who described volunteering with individuals with intellectual disabilities as an experience that enhances happiness and satisfaction in the volunteer's life.

**Research question 2.** What are the transformational learning experiences gained by being involved with Unified Sports?

This study found that the transformational learning experiences occurred through relationships, coaching, and during games. Relationships developed on and off of the soccer fields and basketball courts. Participants mentioned that they did not expect their friendships to exist outside of Unified games on each weekend. Participants connected with athletes on social media and even saw them in social settings outside of unified realm. This is consistent with Wiliski and others (2012) who found that social growth happens on and off of the field. Participants also discussed transformative experiences when put in a coaching position. Participants gained a sense of ownership and leadership with their team. Coaches felt like they had an opportunity to help the college partners and athletes and facilitate their success. This is consistent with Siperstein and others (2001) who found that coaches play an important role in Unified Sports settings by creating an inclusive, safe environment for their team to build confidence and have fun. During the interviews, participants described specific moments when an athlete scored a goal or when the team won an important game. These experiences elicited excitement, joy, and happiness within the volunteers. Transformative experiences can be coupled with strong emotions such as joy and exhilaration (Cranton, 2006).

**Research question 3.** How do students describe their Unified Sports learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or perception changing experience?

This study found that students described their learning process as a moment of realization, positive, unexpected, and unifying. In terms of realization, students involved with Unified Sports have what could also be considered an “aha moment.” Part of



transformative learning is new experiences that challenge one's understanding (Taylor, 2008). The responses are consistent with this statement, as students described their experiences as eye-opening or a moment in time that "clicked" for them. Participants often described their experiences with Unified Sports as being coupled with emotions like happy, special, motivating, and moving. Two students even mentioned crying during their time with Unified Sports, and one participant specifically described their experience as profound and moving. This is again consistent with Cranton (2006) who stated that when adult learners who share their transformative experiences, common themes are joy and exhilaration. When participants described their experiences, they used phrases like "I didn't expect," or "I didn't think" followed by statements about satisfaction, enjoyment, or understanding of athlete's lives. Transformative learning experiences are often unexpected coupled with either stress or discomfort (Taylor, 2008). When interacting with athletes for the first time, participants are typically uncomfortable, either not having interacted with individuals with intellectual disabilities before, or because they are unaware of where on the spectrum the athletes identify. Lastly, participants described their transformational learning in terms of the organization's unifying nature. This is consistent with McConkey and others (2013) who found that Unified Sports programs create an inclusive space that breaks down social barriers of people from all different backgrounds. Describing the transformative learning experience for students within Rowan's Unified Sports program included "aha," positive and unexpected themes.

**Research question 4.** How has participating with Unified Sports impacted Rowan students' perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities?

This study found increase awareness and understanding of individuals with intellectual disabilities in terms of lifestyle, intellect, athleticism, and individualism. Participants were surprised with the intellectual and mental awareness and capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants reflected on the humorous conversations they had with athletes. Participants did not expect the athletes to either be so funny, social, or cognitive. Participants also mentioned the physical abilities of the athletes. Sometimes, the participants even admitted that the athletes were sometimes even more athletic than themselves. This is consistent with two previous studies. McConkey and others (2013) found that participating in programs like Unified Sports results in more positive perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities due to increased education. Sullivan and Glidden (2014) also found that volunteers who are involved in Unified Sports programs realize how capable intellectually, socially, and athletically athletes are compared to volunteers without intellectual disabilities. Participants also reported that interacting with individuals with intellectual disabilities through Unified Sports dispelled the idea that all athletes are one-in-the-same. Prior to participating with Unified Sports, students would categorize individuals with intellectual disabilities to one condition. After having participated with Unified Sports, students reported having a better understanding of range and spectrum of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Dispelling preconceived notions, stigmas, and stereotypes as part of Unified Sports is consistent with the findings of Sullivan and Glidden (2014).

This study also presented a theme that individuals with intellectual disabilities are the same as individuals without intellectual disabilities and should be treated the same and afforded with the same opportunities. Contrary to this theme, one participant described individuals with intellectual disabilities as “different, not less.” This student was the only one to acknowledge that individuals with intellectual disabilities are in fact different, but that does not mean they are any less deserving of opportunities or equal treatment. Five participants also claimed that their perceptions have not necessarily changed because they have had prior experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities. These five participants have either a family member with intellectual disabilities, or were previously involved in a club or program that worked with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Five different participants, however, who also either have a family member with intellectual disabilities or have been involved in a club or program with individuals with intellectual disabilities were still able to describe changing perspectives.

**Research question 5.** Does the experience of a Unified Sports executive board member differ from a non-executive board member?

This study found that executive board members were able to speak more about communication with family members of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the responsibility of running the program, and the overall growth of the program. Two executive board members discussed how communicating with the family members was able to improve skills and comfort relating to communication skills. This is consistent with McConkey and others (2013) who found that volunteers who participate with Unified Sports improve with interpersonal skills such as communication. In terms of

organizing and growth of Unified Sports from an executive board member perspective, there is limited research in this area.

## **Conclusions**

This study was able to support previous findings about the experience of volunteers who participate in programs like Unified Sports. The study was able to identify motivations of students who volunteer for Rowan's Unified Sports program. Motivations were rooted in family, prior experience, and the Unified Sports atmosphere. Furthermore, this study was able to provide insight about the volunteer experience through the lens of transformational learning. Transformative learning is a process through which individuals construct new perceptions and interpretations based on a perspective-changing experience. Such an experience is commonly coupled with feelings of discomfort, but also with strong emotions such as joy and exhilaration. Transformative learning is best described in terms of frames of reference. An initial frame of reference, or perspective, is challenged by a new experience which may or may not result in a more developed frame of references that enhances or changes a person's worldview. A frame of reference has two components: one is the habit of mind, broad ways of thinking, and the second is point of view, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. For participants who exhibited a transformative learning experience, the initial frame of reference encompassed ideas such as: individuals with intellectual disabilities are not athletic or as socially aware or capable as individuals without intellectual disabilities. Volunteers are challenged with interacting with the athletes on a weekly basis as either a teammate or coach. This challenged participant's frames of reference. As participants got to know the athletes and their families, the participants learned about working with different types of people,

diversity of the term “intellectual disabilities,” acceptance, understanding, and equality. In their new frame of reference, participants developed the perception that individuals with intellectual disabilities are more intellectually, mentally, socially, and athletically strong and capable.

As an extension of transformative learning, individuals use their new frame of reference in their everyday life and take action. Participants mentioned that beyond Unified Sports and in their future careers, they have learned how to work with different types of people, how to communicate with people who are different, and the importance of creating an inclusive environment. The motto of Unified Sports programs is, “Play. Live. Unified.” This mentality relates to transformative learning in that individuals should not just have an inclusive mindset on the field, but also in their everyday lives.

While transformative learning experiences were identified with some participants, there were also a small number of students who did not exhibit a transformative experience. This was indicated by shorter responses or lack of self-reflection and understanding. Potential reasons for this could have been the extent to which participants were involved with Unified Sports or how much prior experience, personal or recreational, an individual has with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, this study was able to speak to the experiences of the students who are on the executive board. Students who serve on the executive board are responsible for the planning and execution of the soccer and basketball leagues each semester, as well as the implementation of additional Unified programming such as the Unified Fall Ball or Unified Night at Rowan’s Division III games. Executive board students were able to expand on the effort and time that goes into planning these events and running the

program. Executive board members also spoke to communication skills, particularly with family members of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Executive board members were also able to reflect on the growth of the program and student interest in Unified Sports.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study and previous research, the following recommendations for practice of Unified Sports programs on college campuses are presented:

1. Unified Sports programs should plan more events outside of the athletic opportunities to further expose students to the lifestyles and friendships with individuals with intellectual disabilities.
2. Unified Sports programs should create opportunities for the volunteers to interact with the parents and family members of the athletes to encourage more learning and understanding of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. A study should be conducted using an initial round of interviews as well as follow-up interviews to further examine transformative learning experiences.
2. Participants included in the research should have four or more semesters of participation with Unified Sports to ensure that participants can speak to a longer, developed experience with the program.
3. Future studies on transformative learning and Unified Sports should be conducted at various colleges with the program to determine similarities or differences on the impact on student volunteers.

4. Future studies that compare the experience of Unified Sports executive board members should include more questions that allow executive board members to talk more about their motivation for applying to be on the executive board and their responsibilities.

## References

- Collier, V., Rothwell, E., Vanzo, R., & Carbone, P.S. (2015). Initial investigation of comfort levels, motivations, and attitudes of volunteers during therapeutic recreation programs. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 49(3), 207-219.
- Cranton, P. (2006). Transformation: The Learner's Story. *Understanding and promoting transformative learning* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fast Facts. (2017). *Rowan University*. Retrieved from <http://sites.rowan.edu/fastfacts>
- Haas, K. (2012). *An Emerging Player in the Sport for Development*. Brown University: Special Olympics, Inc.
- Isaacs, S., Rose, J., & Davids, C. (2016). Transformative learning: postgraduate students' reflections on a community engagement program in South Africa. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 44(1), 103-115.
- Kitchenham, A. (2008). The evolution of John Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 6(2), 104-123.
- McConkey, R., Dowling, S., Hassan, D., & Menke, S. (2013) Promoting social inclusion through unified sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 57(10), 923-935.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12.
- Moylan, W. (2015). The effects of Unified Sports on attitudes of college students towards students with intellectual disabilities. *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 324.
- Ozer, D., Baran, F., Nalbant, S., Aglamis, E., & Hutzler, Y. (2012). Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 33, 229-239.
- Simm, D. & Marvell, A. (2015). Gaining a sense of place: students affective experiences of place leading to transformative learning on international fieldwork. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 39(4), 595-616.
- Siperstein, G., Hardman, M., Wappett, M., & Clary, L. (2001). *National evaluation of the Special Olympics unified sports program. A special report*. University of Massachusetts Boston and University of Utah. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.



- Sisco, B. R. (1981). *A study of the attitudes of selected academics and selected decision makers toward adult learners*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
- Sohn, B. K., Plass, K., Franklin, K., Dellard, T., Murphy, B., Greenberg, K. H., Greenberg, N. B., Pollio, H. R., & Thomas, S. P. (2016). Freedom to connect: insight into the existential dimension of transformative learning in a graduate seminar. *Journal of Transformative Education, 14*(3), 178-199.
- Sullivan, E. & Glidden, L.M. (2014). Changing attitudes toward disabilities through Unified Sports. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 52*(5), 367-378.
- Taylor, E. (2000). Fostering Mezirow's transformative learning theory in the adult education classroom: a critical review. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 14*(2), 1-28.
- Taylor, E.W. (2008). Transformative learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 119*, 5-15.
- Turner, D.W. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report, 15*(3), 754-760.
- Warner, C. A. A. (2009). A phenomenological approach to understanding the transformative experience of adult learners in short term study abroad programs. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Digital Dissertations Database.
- Wilski, M., Nadolska, A., Dowling, S., McConkey, R., & Hassan, D. (2012). Personal development of participants in Special Olympics Unified Sports teams. *Human Movement, 13*(3), 271-279.

## Appendix A

### Approval Letter from Warner

Wednesday, February 21, 2018 at 1:54:19 PM Eastern Standard Time

**Subject:** Re: Rowan University Graduate Student - Thesis Inquiry  
**Date:** Wednesday, February 21, 2018 at 1:30:08 PM Eastern Standard Time  
**From:** Cathy Warner  
**To:** Francisco, Mariah

Absolutely, adopt and adapt as you need. I love phenomenological research because you can get some great depth in response content. Good luck!

Dr. Cathy

(I route all of my email to my gmail account, which is why it bounced to here. I'm no longer at CMU, I've moved and teach at a community college in northern Michigan now.)

Take care and best of luck with your research!

On Tue, Feb 20, 2018 at 4:15 PM, Francisco, Mariah <[francisco@rowan.edu](mailto:francisco@rowan.edu)> wrote:

Dear Ms. Warner:

My name is

Mariah Francisco and I am a second-year Graduate Student in the Master's of Higher Education, Administration Program at Rowan University. One of the requirements of this program is to complete a thesis exploring a topic of interest related to the field of education.

Throughout my time at Rowan,

I have participated in a sport club called Unified Sports, a partnership between our institution and Special Olympics New Jersey. In this organization, I have taken the role as a partner (a college student that plays alongside individuals with intellectual disabilities), coach, and now Co-Advisor overseeing the student executive board. Through my involvement, I have developed a passion for Unified Sports and working with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

I decided

to merge my academics with my extracurricular involvement to write my thesis on Rowan Unified Sports and Transformative Learning. I am reaching out to you because I am now in the phase of developing an instrument to use in my study. I read your dissertation titled, "A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding the Transformative Experience of Adult Learners in Short Term Study Abroad Program" and am interested in the survey instrument you constructed. While we are focusing on a different population of students, I admired your approach to connecting research to your interview questions.

I am interested in adapting this survey instruments to fit my thesis and research questions. I will be interviewing about 14 students to learn more about their experience with Unified Sports. I am emailing you for permission to adopt your survey instrument and adjust it to more closely match my research with students. I will ensure that I properly cite your survey, as well as include the original survey in the appendices of my thesis.

Page 1 of 2

If you should have any questions about our program or assignment, please let me know.

Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you, at your earliest convenience.

—  
**Mariah Francisco**

Graduate Coordinator, Leadership Rowan

Division of Student Affairs

Rowan University  
201 Mullica Hill Rd., Savitz Hall - Suite 203 | Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

T: 856-256-4296 | F: 856-256-4460 | [rowan.edu/leadership](http://rowan.edu/leadership)

[Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Proflink](#) | [Twitter](#)

## Appendix B

### Warner's (2009) Interview Questions

#### APPENDIX D

##### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

The following questions will guide the two semi-structured interviews.

1. Tell me about what has motivated you to enrol in this course.
2. How do you see this course / experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?
3. Tell me about some of your more meaningful experiences during your experience.
  - a. (follow-up if not helpful response to Question 3) What experiences have you felt were particularly useful, relevant, or enlightening thus far during your study abroad experience here?
4. In terms of orientation, how well prepared do you feel you were for this experience?
  - a. (follow-up) Can you describe your orientation experience?
5. What experiences have been unexpected during this study abroad course?
6. What experiences have you found challenging or unhelpful in facilitating learning prior to or during your experience abroad?
7. What changes could be made to this course that would help you learn?
8. Do you have past experiences traveling or studying abroad? [If so] How have these experiences shaped or influenced your preparation or experience here & now?
9. Do you feel you held misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about China or Chinese culture? [If so] and how has this experience changed your perceptions?

10. Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your experiences while studying abroad?

Follow Up Interview:

1. [follow up interview] In reflecting on your experience, what contributed and helped you learn? What detracted from or blocked your learning?
2. [follow-up interview] When asked about your experiences in the study abroad course, what experience do you highlight or share as meaningful highlights of the experience?.
3. [follow up interview] How has this experience impacted you or your thoughts and perceptions related to globalization, your country, or international relations?
4. [follow-up interview]What changes have you made in your personal or professional practices because of this experience? [if no changes noted or perceptive changes only], how have perceptions changed?
5. If given the opportunity to have this experience again, would you do it? Why/ why not?
6. What thoughts or recommendations would you have for others who are designing programs similar to the one you participated in?
7. [follow-up interview] Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your study abroad experience?

## Appendix C

### Warner's (2009) Crosswalk Table

**RESEARCH QUESTION CROSSWALK TABLE**

<b>Research Questions:</b>	Guiding Question: To what extent does an adult learner study abroad experience result in transformational learning for the adult learner?	Sub-question 1: Why do adult learners engage in a study abroad course?	What contributed to or detracted from their learning before, during, or after their experience?	How do adult learners describe their study abroad learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or noticeable change experiences?	How does this experience change their perceptions of globalization?	<b>Related Literature:</b>
<b>Interview Questions:</b>						
Tell me about what has motivated you to enroll in this course.		X				motivation; andragogy, Knowles
How do you see this course / experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?	X	X		X		Andragogy, Knowles; learning, Illeris
Tell me about some of your more meaningful experiences during your experience. (follow-up if not helpful response to question 3) What experiences have you felt were particularly useful, relevant, or enlightening thus far during your study abroad experience here?	X		X	X	X	Transformational learning, Dirkx; Andragogy, Knowles; learning, Illeris; Globalization, Hurst, Giddens.
In terms of orientation, how well prepared do you feel you are for this experience? (follow-up) Can you describe your orientation experience?			X			Learning, Illeris; Scaffolded learning, Dirkx, et. al.
What experiences have been unexpected during			X	X		Andragogy, Knowles; Culture shock,

this study abroad course?						scaffolded learning (lacking schemas)
What experiences have you found challenging or unhelpful in facilitating learning prior to or during your experience abroad?			X			Scaffolded learning, Dirkx, et. al. ; Orientation, journaling?
What changes could be made to this course that would help you learn?			X	X		Learning, Illeris; Andragogy, Knowles; Scaffolded learning, Dirkx
Do you have past experiences traveling or studying abroad? [If so] How have these experiences shaped or influenced your preparation or experience here & now?	X		X	X	X	Globalization, Friedman, Giddens, Hurst; Scaffolded learning, Dirkx
Do you feel you held misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about China or Chinese culture? [If so] and <u>how</u> has this experience <u>changed your perceptions?</u>	X				X	Transformational Learning, Mezirow, Dirkx; learning, Illeris
Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your experiences while studying abroad?	X	X	X	X	X	Andragogy, Knowles; transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx, learning, Illeris



<p><b>Follow Up Interview:</b></p>	<p>Guiding Question: To what extent does an adult learner study abroad experience result in transformational learning for the adult learner?</p>	<p>Sub-question 1: Why do adult learners engage in a study abroad course?</p>	<p>What contributed to or detracted from their learning before, during, or after their experience?</p>	<p>How do adult learners describe their study abroad learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or perception changing experiences?</p>	<p>How does this experience change their perceptions of globalization?</p>	<p><b>Related Literature:</b></p>
<p>In reflecting on your experience, what contributed and helped you learn? What detracted from or blocked your learning?</p>	<p>X</p>			<p>X</p>		<p>Reflective learning, transformational learning, Dirkx, Mezirow, Kerka; andragogy, Knowles</p>
<p>When asked about your experiences in the study abroad course, what experience do you highlight or share as meaningful highlights of the experience?</p>	<p>X</p>		<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>	<p>Transformational learning, Dirkx, Mezirow.</p>
<p>How has this experience impacted you or your thoughts and perceptions related to globalization?</p>	<p>X</p>			<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>	<p>Globalization, Hurst, Giddens, Friedman; reflective practices; transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx</p>
<p>What changes have you made in your personal or professional practices because of this experience? [If no</p>	<p>X</p>				<p>X</p>	<p>Transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx</p>



changes noted or perceptive changes only], how have perceptions changed?						
If given the opportunity to have this experience again, would you do it? Why/ why not?	X	X	X	X		Transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx; Reflection
What thoughts or recommendations would you have for others who are designing programs similar to the one you participated in?			X	X		Transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx; Reflection
<u>Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your study abroad experience?</u>	X	X	X	X	X	Transformational learning, Mezirow, Dirkx; Reflection

## Appendix D

### Approval Letter from Baker



March 8, 2018

Dear Dr. Sisco and eIRB Committee:

I am writing to acknowledge that Mariah Francisco, graduate student of the Higher Education Administration master's program, will be conducting individual interviews with students involved with the Rowan Unified Sports Program as part of the completion of her thesis and graduation requirement. As the Co-Advisor of Rowan Unified Sports, I support Mariah's research and will assist as needed in the process. In fact, I am hopeful that this research will help further understand the impact of the Unified Sports program on our students here at Rowan!

If you should have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out below. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Gary Baker  
Unified Sports, Co-Advisor  
bakerga@rowan.edu | 856-256-4042

## Appendix E

### Participant Recruitment

Dear Unified Sports Participant,

My name is Mariah Francisco and I am a graduate student here at Rowan University. I am conducting research to learn about the experiences of students who are involved with Rowan Unified Sports. I am particularly interested in determining if students who participate with Rowan Unified Sports experience what is known as a transformative learning experience. I am completing my master's degree and this research is part of the completion of my thesis and graduate program.

I am reaching out to see if you are interested in being part of my research. Participation in this study involves an individual interview with me within the near future. This interview should take no longer than 45 minutes of your time. My hope is to learn more about your experience participating with the Rowan Unified Sports program. Also, you will help me meet the graduation requirements of my master's program.

If you would like to participate in this study, please let me know. At the time of your interview, I will have a consent form for you to sign.

Thank you for considering being part of my research! If you should have any further questions, please feel free to reach out to me, or the Principal Investigator:

Dr. Burton Sisco

[sisco@rowan.edu](mailto:sisco@rowan.edu)

856-256-3717

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mariah Francisco

[franciscom@rowan.edu](mailto:franciscom@rowan.edu)

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent



#### CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**TITLE OF STUDY: Rowan Unified Sports: Impact on Student Volunteers Through the Lens of Transformative Learning**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Burton Sisco**

**Co-Investigator: Mariah Francisco**

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you to decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study. It will help you to understand what the study is about and what will happen in the course of the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask them and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

The Co-Investigator another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

**A. Why is this study being done?**

This study is being done to understand the impact of participation with Rowan Unified Sports on Rowan student volunteers through the lens of transformative learning. In addition, the study will contribute to the completion of the co-investigator's thesis and graduation requirement.

**B. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**

You have been asked to take part in this study because you have been involved with Rowan Unified Sports for at least two semesters. As a result, you are identified as an individual who can speak to the impact of participation in the program on Rowan students, like yourself.

**C. Who may take part in this study? And who may not?**

The target subject population is current Rowan Unified Sports partners who have participated in the program for at least two full semesters. This includes the Unified Sports Executive board members. Excluded from the study are Rowan Unified Sports partners who have participated in less than two semesters of the program.

**D. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

The number of participants enrolled in the study will be 14 Rowan students who have participated in the Rowan Unified Sports program for at least two full semesters.

**E. How long will my participation in this study take?**

The individual interview will last approximately 45 minutes. As a participant, you will be asked to reflect and answer questions regarding your experience with the Rowan Unified Sports Program.

**F. Where will the study take place?**

You will be asked to meet at a public place on Rowan University's campus, located at 201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ, 08028. You will be asked to come to this location between March 26 – April 6 to participate in an individual interview.

**G. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

If you take part in this research study, you will be asked to answer questions about yourself and your experience with Unified Sports.

**H. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

There is little to no risk of harm for participants in this study. All participant information will remain confidential. The only risk that subjects could potentially feel is stressed while responding to items on the topic of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This risk is minimal and should not have any long-term effects on the subjects.

**I. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

This study could help students who participate in the Rowan Unified Sports program the potential impact that participation has on students' perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities at Rowan University and beyond their college career.

**J. What are your alternatives if you don't want to take part in this study?**

There are no alternative treatments available. Your alternative is not to take part in this study.

**K. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

During the course of the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

**L. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

There will be no cost to you to take part in this study.

**M. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

**N. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

Information on the subjects will involve an audio recording and physical note taking during the interview. Only the co-investigator and the principal investigator will have access to any results. Audio recordings will be saved as digitalized data on a password protected computer and any physical notes will be secured in a locked filing cabinet in the co-investigators office on the Rowan University campus. All interviews will be digitally transcribed and these documents will be filed on a password-protected computer.

**O. What will happen if you are injured during this study?**

If at any time during your participation and conduct in the study you have been or are injured, you should communicate those injuries to the research staff present at the time of injury and to the Principal Investigator, whose name and contact information is on this consent form.

**P. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to Mariah Francisco, 201 Mullica Hill Road, Glassboro, NJ 08028.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**Q. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

Dr. Burton Sisco  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
856-256-3717

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance  
(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

**What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

### AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Burton Sisco, Principal Investigator, and Mariah Francisco, Co-Investigator. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape (sound) part of that research study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the research team, primarily the co-investigator, Mariah Francisco.

The recording(s) will include your answers to interview protocol.

The recording(s) will be stored as audio recordings and will be saved as digitalized data on a password protected computer.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

---

### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read this entire form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix G

### Interview Protocol

1. Demographics
  - a. What is your academic class status?
  - b. What is your major?
  - c. How many semesters have you been involved with Unified Sports?
  - d. What roles do you play while involved with Unified Sports?
2. Tell me about what has motivated you to participate with Unified Sports.
3. How do you see this experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?
4. Tell me about your more meaningful experiences during your experience with Unified Sports.
5. What experiences have been unexpected during your participation with Unified Sports?
6. Do you have past experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities? How have these experiences shaped or influenced your preparation or experience here and now?
7. Do you feel you've had misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities?
8. How has this experience impacted your thoughts and perceptions related to individuals with intellectual disabilities?
9. Any additional information or thoughts you would like to share about your experiences while participating with Unified Sports?

## Appendix H

### Research Question Crosswalk Table

<b>Research Questions:</b>	Why do students get involved with Unified Sports? What do they hope to learn or gain from the experience?	What are the transformational learning experiences gained by being involved with Unified Sports?	How do students describe their Unified Sports Learning process in terms of meaningful, impactful, or perception changing experiences?	How has participating with Rowan Unified Sports impacted Rowan students' perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities?	Does the experience of a Unified Sports Executive Board Member differ from a non-executive board member?
Tell me about what has motivated you to participate with Unified Sports.	X				X
How do you see this experience relating to or affecting your work in your job or profession?	X	X	X		
Tell me about your more meaningful experiences during your experience with Unified Sports.		X	X	X	X
What experiences have been unexpected during your			X		

participation with Unified Sports?					
Do you have past experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities? How have these experiences shaped or influenced your preparation or experience here and now?		X	X		X
Do you feel you've had misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities?			X	X	
How has this experience impacted your thoughts and perceptions related to individuals with intellectual disabilities?		X	X	X	
Any additional information or thoughts you would like to	X	X	X	X	X

share about your experiences while participating with Unified Sports?					
---	--	--	--	--	--

## Appendix I

### Rules and Procedures for Logical Analysis of Written Data

#### RULES AND PROCEDURES FOR LOGICAL ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN DATA

The following decisions were made regarding what was to be the unit of data analysis (Sisco, 1981):

1. A phrase or clause will be the basic unit of analysis.
2. Verbiage not considered essential to the phrase or clause will be edited out -- e.g., articles of speech, possessives, some adjectives, elaborate examples.
3. Where there is a violation of conventional syntax in the data, it will be corrected.
4. Where there are compound thoughts in a phrase or clause, each unit of thought will be represented separately (unless one was an elaboration of the other).
5. Where information seems important to add to the statement in order to clarify it in a context, this information will be added to the unit by parentheses.

The following decisions were made regarding the procedures for categorization of content units:

1. After several units are listed on a sheet of paper, they will be scanned in order to determine differences and similarities.
2. From this tentative analysis, logical categories will be derived for the units.
3. When additional units of data suggest further categories, they will be added to the classification scheme.
4. After all the units from a particular question's responses are thus classified, the categories are further reduced to broader clusters (collapsing of categories).
5. Frequencies of units in each cluster category are determined and further analysis steps are taken, depending on the nature of the data-- i.e. ranking of categories with verbatim quotes which represent the range of ideas or opinions. (p.177).

Sisco, B. R. (1981). *A study of the attitudes of selected academics and selected decision makers toward adult learners*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.