

Innovation grants allow a broad spectrum of campus partners to create and fund a variety of new programs for adaptive sports and fitness on campus.

Fitness Test: Inclusion Builds Strength

MOST STUDENTS, UPON beginning their studies at Berkeley, discover that the university leads the world in many fields and programs. However, when Matt Grigorieff '12 M.A. Ed '15, transferred to Berkeley as a junior, he found that Berkeley was far behind Saddleback Community College in ensuring people with disabilities benefit from comprehensive athletics programs.

Grigorieff has an invisible disability that has affected his hip and leg motion since he was seven years old, so this issue is personally important to him. As a student at Berkeley, Grigorieff focused on significantly improving access to sports facilities and programs. He was selected as a Haas Scholar — one of 20 highly qualified, academically talented undergraduates who come together to build a supportive intellectual community during their senior year at Berkeley.

In the spring of 2009, Berkeley offered 98 courses in the Physical Education Department, but none were designed for disabled students. “Forty years after Berkeley helped forge a civil rights movement for people with disabilities, neither Berkeley nor any UC institution had a plan or program for addressing the fitness needs of the disabled,” said Grigorieff. Recognizing the shortcoming, his research focus as part of the Haas Scholar program was to document adaptive sports programs at other institutions of higher education and begin to assemble recommendations for improving facilities and programs at Berkeley.

His initial recommendations included hiring full-time staff specialists and rebuilding one of the swimming pools with an adjustable bottom to accommodate those with limited mobility. However, funding was not available for those projects, so Grigorieff moved to Plan B. He wrote a successful proposal for an Equity & Inclusion Innovation Grant, made

possible by the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, to support projects growing from student, staff, and faculty initiatives. The Innovation Grant allowed Grigorieff to bring together key stakeholders on campus in a collaborative spirit, including the Department of Recreational Sports, University Health Services, American Cultures Engaged Scholarship, the Disabled Student Program, Cal Inter-collegiate Athletics, the Division of Equity & Inclusion, and campus fundraisers.

“We thought he just needed analysis, but Matt is much more action-oriented,” said Mike Weinberger, director of the Department of Recreational Sports (RSF) on campus. “He wanted to quickly develop programs that would develop opportunities.”

One of the unique aspects of the sports being introduced at Berkeley through Grigorieff’s Fitness for All program is that they level the playing field between non-disabled and disabled athletes. In fact, athletes with disabilities are teaching the non-disabled how to function in a new world. Sighted athletes wear blindfolds to play goalball, a sport developed for visually impaired veterans following WWII in which teams of three players try to hurl a heavy rubber ball with bells embedded in it into the opponents’ goal. Power soccer, introduced to the campus in the fall of 2015, takes place on a basketball court and allows those who have never used a power wheelchair to learn the fine points of steering, momentum, and turn ratios from athletes who rely on wheelchairs to maneuver through their world.

“Matt changed the department [of recreational sports] by enlarging our vision and broadening our awareness and program offerings,” Weinberger said. “He brought in information that we were unaware of, and he found coaches and class instructors. Matt



Tiffany Zhao and
Will Salson



Matt Grigorieff

is a remarkable individual with a passion of increasing opportunities for people with disabilities.”

Now earning his master’s degree at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education, Grigorieff is mentored by Assistant Adjunct Professor Derek Van Rheenan, the director of Cultural Studies of Sport in Education. Grigorieff’s research focuses on the impact of sports for people with disabilities and highlights the unique curriculum design used in adaptive sports classes at Berkeley. Another important feature is that offering single units of academic credit for Fitness for All classes helps students with very full schedules find time and space to explore this new field. A three-unit course, “Education, the Student Body and Disability Studies,” taught by Van Rheenan and Grigorieff, will debut in the spring of 2016.

Some of the changes are less noticeable than others. In the fall of 2012, the program installed accessible workout equipment in several campus gyms, including the new Simpson Center Student Athlete High Performance Center. Universal design equipment is becoming the norm for RSF purchases, as are accessible locker rooms. In 2013, Berkeley hired Marty Turcios to help student golfers at all levels overcome obstacles with their swings, putts, chips, and drives. Turcios, who has cerebral palsy, and his golf coaching career was the focus of a recent KQED video.

As the first competitive collegiate team for blind students, Berkeley’s goalball team has garnered significant attention from Chancellor Nicholas B. Dirks and from public media. In 2014, Dirks introduced the team during a home football game and presented the team members — including Van Dyke, the guide dog — with their team jerseys. “I never imagined I’d ever play sports on a team,” said Judith Lung, a Berkeley senior. Lung described to Chancellor Dirks her time as a child spent “playing with paper and doing quiet activities.” “Here at Berkeley,” she told him, “I was given a chance to be on a team, to be competitive, to experience something I never could have imagined in my life.”

The Catalyst Moment

An Innovation Grant brought together a broad spectrum of campus partners to create and fund a variety of new programs — from adaptive and universal design workout equipment to new competitive sports teams.

Best Practices

- » Offer academic credit to allow more students to experience the program.
- » Place accessible equipment in prominent workout spaces to ensure its usage and integration and upgrade accessible locker rooms to aid in inclusion.
- » Expand the role of programs well beyond legal Americans with Disabilities (ADA) requirements to health, employability, and broader issues.

Lessons Learned

- » Identify and build from the home institution’s strengths in facilities and programming rather than trying to import another school’s model.
- » Start small and build new projects on proven successes.

What’s Next

- » Continue expanding accessible sports, including a sailing class for visually impaired students offered by Marin Sailing School.
- » The campus is seeking funding for a dedicated staff person to lead Fitness for All.
- » Berkeley plans to make a case to the National College Athletic Association for including sports for athletes with disabilities.