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Review Article

Designing Participation Pathways in Campus Sport: An Inclusive Service Model for Access, Belonging and Retention

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Abstract: University sport functions as a service with measurable participation denominators, yet novice participants can remain on the margins even when attendance is complete. This conceptual analysis narrows the goal of inclusive provision to three observable service conditions: access to meaningful activity and decision opportunities, belonging within cooperative and competitive group activity, and independent continuation beyond the course. It draws on physical literacy scholarship, self-determination theory, disability perspectives, universal design for learning and internationally recognised adapted participation formats. The distinctive contribution is a participation-pathway audit that records whether adaptations generate genuine involvement or merely supply modified equipment. A co-design protocol, a differentiated twelve-week curriculum, opportunity-denominator indicators usable as participation metrics, and a post-course follow-up plan are developed. Physical literacy is used as a supporting multidimensional rationale rather than a validated total outcome, and injury prevention is treated as a safety obligation rather than a central claim. Direct evidence for these mechanisms in campus sport remains limited. No interviews, participation rates, disability disclosures, retention outcomes or health effects are reported. The principal contribution is a set of transparent, feasible design and evaluation questions for providers seeking equitable and sustainable engagement.

Keywords: Service Design, Participation Management, Inclusion, Belonging, Retention, Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

University physical education is not just a training ground for future elite athletes. It is also a place where students can build a lasting relationship with sport, experience purposeful movement, and pick up skills that stay useful after graduation. Racket sport offers social, recreational, and competitive chances across adult life. But an elective course can push people away when assessment rewards only absolute stroke power, match results, or a narrow picture of able-bodied movement.

Entry-level differences in racket sport are large. Students vary in age, sport experience, mobility, sensory access, language, confidence, cultural familiarity, money, and prior opportunity. Those differences cannot be handled by offering one standardized drill and marking everyone against the same elite technique. An inclusive course asks instead whether every student can reach the core learning problem, receive meaningful challenge, show growth, and hold legitimate membership in the class. Equality of purpose may require different equipment, pacing, or response modes—not identical tasks.

This article brings together physical literacy scholarship (Edwards *et al*., 2017; Cairney *et al*., 2019), universal design (CAST, 2024), students' perspectives in inclusive physical education (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015), and autonomy-supportive learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Safety and progressive loading are treated as conditions for responsible participation, not as injury-prevention claims. The specific goal is to propose and evaluate a pathway from accessible racket-sport opportunities to social involvement and self-directed recreational play.

This is a conceptual curriculum proposal informed by targeted searches of peer-reviewed physical education and sport-participation scholarship, organizational guidelines, and reference lists available through October 2026. It is not a systematic review, a tested accessibility intervention, or an account of students recruited for this project. The narrower research question is: in a beginning campus racket-sport course, how can instructional design make opportunities to act, belong, and continue playing observable and revisable? Physical literacy and universal design are used as

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relevant lenses. Neither is presented as an already validated explanation for outcomes in this exact setting.

The distinctive proposal is a participation pathway with three stages. Access means the student can meet a recognizable racket-sport problem and respond at a feasible level. Belonging means the student holds a respected, active role in shared play instead of being present only as a spectator, ball collector, or permanently dependent helper. Continuation means the student can arrange an appropriate recreational experience without constant institutional instruction. The stages are analytically distinct. Accessible equipment does not guarantee social membership. Enthusiasm during a supervised course does not prove independent participation months later.

Self-determination theory distinguishes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as relevant dimensions of educational motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Here they supply plausible mechanisms to investigate, not guaranteed effects. Physical literacy is likewise treated as multidimensional scholarship rather than reduced to a single aggregate score. Reviews warn that definitions and instruments differ substantially across studies (Edwards *et al*., 2017, 2018).

2. Distinguishing Access, Belonging, and Continuation

2.1. Physical Literacy as a Multidimensional Educational Aim

Physical literacy has been described through interrelated dimensions that can include physical competence, confidence, motivation, knowledge, and engagement with movement (Edwards *et al*., 2017). Cairney *et al.,* (2019) proposed an evidence-informed conceptual model linking physical literacy, physical activity, and health. These contributions caution against equating one standardized motor test with the whole construct. For a campus racket-sport course, the practical implication is that contact accuracy, tactical understanding, confidence, and continued willingness to participate are related but distinguishable outcomes.

A beginner who learns to start a rally, arrange a recreational game, and practice safely with peers may have gained capabilities relevant to later participation even without a high-performance serve. An experienced player may develop a different form of physical literacy through adapting tactics, mentoring cooperatively, or managing practice load. Assessment should therefore avoid rewarding only the students who arrived with prior club training. Growth and demonstrated access to meaningful racket-sport actions deserve attention.

Physical literacy should also not be reduced to an inspirational slogan or an automatically valid total score. Its constructs must be defined clearly against the intended course outcomes. If educators choose surveys or composite indices, the selected instruments should have evidence of validity for the language, age, and setting concerned. Until then, claims about improved "physical literacy" should be framed as interpretations of separate competence, confidence, knowledge, and participation indicators.

2.2. Engagement is Shaped By the Social Teaching Environment

Qualitative research on self-determination theory in physical education highlights the importance of choice, experiences of competence, and supportive relationships (White *et al*., 2021). A systematic review of autonomy-support interventions in physical education and youth sport found that teacher behavior can be modified, while more research is needed to establish downstream effects across contexts (Raabe *et al*., 2019). Applied to campus racket sport, these findings support a shift away from public ability labeling and toward bounded choice, respectful feedback, and opportunities for attainable success.

A student who is consistently picked last for doubles or given only ball-collecting duties is physically present but not necessarily included. Teachers should distribute active roles, invite multiple forms of contribution, and prevent ridicule tied to missed shots or movement differences. Mixed-ability pairings can work well when responsibilities are explicit and reciprocal. They turn inequitable when stronger students monopolize decisions, weaker students are used only as feeders, or modifications are treated as marks of inferiority.

3. Universal Design as a Starting Point, Not a Universal Solution

The CAST (2024) Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines 3.0 organize design around multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. In racket-sport instruction, engagement may mean choosing a meaningful practice goal; representation may mean demonstrations, visual court diagrams, and brief spoken instructions; action and expression may mean several legitimate ways to show tactical understanding. The intent is to remove avoidable barriers while keeping standards clear.

UDL, however, should not be presented as a method that automatically solves every inclusion challenge. Haegele *et al.,* (2024) critically examined assumptions about UDL within physical education and called for stronger theory-driven empirical work. An earlier qualitative synthesis by Haegele and Sutherland (2015) likewise stressed the importance of students' perspectives and the role that teacher attitudes and meaningful accommodations play in physical education experiences. These cautions matter because an instructor cannot infer a student's preferred adaptation from a diagnostic label alone.

The framework therefore uses UDL as a planning heuristic and student consultation as a continuing process. An instructor may offer a slower ball and a smaller court, but the student should have a chance to say whether those changes support the targeted participation or feel needlessly restrictive. An adapted activity has to stay recognizably racket-sport-like, socially meaningful, and appropriately challenging. Choice should be genuine. Support should not depend on a student publicly explaining sensitive personal information.

Table 1: Inclusive design options organized by access need and learning function

Potential barrier	Accessible design option	Learning function preserved	Check with learner
High incoming-ball speed	Lower-compression ball; cooperative initiation	Tracking, contact, target selection	Does pace allow meaningful decisions?
Large movement demands	Smaller court; controlled feed; planned rest	Court-position problem at feasible scale	Does the task respect current capacity?
Instructional language load	Visual diagram; demonstration; short plain-language cues	Understanding the same tactical task	Which explanation is clearest?
Difficulty observing demonstrations	Choice of viewing location and replay; accessible verbal description	Perception of key information	Is essential information available?
Performance anxiety	Low-stakes pair practice; private feedback; role choice	Participation and purposeful practice	Does the environment feel supportive?
Unequal prior experience	Challenge tiers using targets, rules, and opponent behavior	Common objective with adjusted challenge	Is the activity too easy or too difficult?

3.1. The Participation-Pathway Audit

A practical audit asks three different questions about each instructional unit. Access: how many students actually receive opportunities to track a ball, choose a response, and strike during time designated for active racket play? Belonging: do partner rotations and game rules distribute meaningful decisions, or do more experienced students control the rally while others wait? Continuation: can each student select appropriate equipment, organize a feasible playing partner or setting, and describe a plan for returning to racket sport voluntarily after the course? These questions cannot be answered by counting attendance or surveying enjoyment alone.

To avoid misleading statistics, the audit records a numerator and an opportunity denominator. A teacher may report the number of student-initiated strokes during an agreed observation window divided by the number of allotted contact opportunities, while also keeping the raw opportunity count. For doubles decision participation, coders can identify eligible decisions in which a student was positioned and permitted to play. Results should be disaggregated descriptively by entry skill and adaptation used when ethically appropriate, without forcing students to reveal private diagnoses. The definitions are proposed observation categories and require piloting before comparative conclusions.

Table 2: Participation-pathway audit with operational prompts and exclusion safeguards

Pathway stage	Classroom indicator	Denominator or comparator	Risk of false inference
Access	Meaningful contact-and-choice attempts	Observed allotted opportunities per learner	High counts may occur in overly easy drills
Belonging	Reciprocal court roles and partner involvement	Observed eligible shared-game episodes	Proximity does not demonstrate agency
Continuation	Student can organize appropriate play	Specified independence tasks; later voluntary follow-up	End-of-course intention is not actual behavior
Equity safeguard	Adaptation is agreed and revisable	Student consultation/alternative mode recorded	One modification may stigmatize or underchallenge

3.2. A Student-Consultation and Revision Protocol

At the start of an instructional unit, the teacher explains two or three equivalent routes to the same racket-sport learning goal. A student can choose a slower ball, a smaller area, altered scoring, or a different communication mode without public justification. The teacher then checks whether the choice provides a playable challenge and a fair role in shared activity. At a midpoint check, the student may keep, intensify, or change the adaptation; the instructor records why. This protocol treats consent and learner knowledge as central to inclusive planning while keeping professional responsibility for safety and meaningful learning.

The consultation should not request unnecessary medical detail, and it should not assume that disability entails novice skill or that experienced players cannot need support. The critical question is whether the teaching adaptation changes access to the same educational function. A shortened court that helps a

student sustain a rally can be legitimate. A constant assignment to ball collection in the name of protection cannot serve as an equivalent expression of racket-sport competence.

4. Scaled Formats as a Legitimate Learning Environment

The International Tennis Federation's participation guidance describes Tennis Play and Stay as an approach using smaller courts, shorter rackets, and slower balls to help newcomers serve, rally, and score. It also describes red-ball formats for adults that keep key features of racket-sport play (International Tennis Federation, n.d.). These initiatives are a practical example of access-oriented equipment design. But institutional teachers still have to judge which adaptations fit their course and learners.

A scaled court can cut the travel demands of a rally without removing target choice, opponent awareness, or scoring. A slower ball can make bounce judgment and early contact more attainable. For some students, these modifications are a temporary bridge to full-court play. For others, an adapted format may be the right way to keep playing recreationally. The educational objective should be the capacity to engage in meaningful play—not compulsory progression to one supposedly superior format.

Scaled games can still carry demanding tactical content. A two-zone red-ball game may require reading open space. A reduced-court doubles game can require partner coordination. A safe cooperative exchange can involve trajectory control and anticipatory recovery. Advanced students can work on narrower targets or complex directional changes within the same physical space. Differentiation, then, should not be confused with handing less intellectually meaningful learning to students who need physical adaptations.

5. Safety as a Practical Condition for Participation

Racket sports combine repeated strokes, changes of direction, intermittent exertion, and movement that may be unfamiliar to novices. Pluim *et al*., (2006) reviewed tennis injuries and reported substantial variation in incidence estimates and limits in the available causal evidence. That review should not be read as supplying a precise injury probability for today's university recreational classes. But it does support deliberate attention to safe movement, symptoms, and the volume of repeated actions.

The International Olympic Committee consensus on load and injury risk emphasizes individual exposure, changes in load, recovery, and athlete monitoring (Soligard *et al*., 2016). That consensus mostly concerns sport training populations and cannot be transplanted as a fixed numerical threshold for elective racket-sport students. A reasonable course-level application is to avoid abrupt jumps in high-intensity striking or rapid cutting, offer progressive movement preparation, and adjust tasks when students report unusual fatigue or discomfort.

For routine teaching, the instructor can begin with a dynamic warm-up suited to the activity, progress from controlled movement to multidirectional play, and spread demanding serve practice rather than concentrating large volumes of overhead hitting in a short window. Students can report perceived exertion using a simple, consistently explained scale, while teachers watch for qualitative signs of overexertion. Such monitoring informs individualized adjustments but is not a medical diagnostic instrument.

A clear response protocol is essential: stop or modify an activity when pain, dizziness, or other concerning symptoms arise, and refer the student to qualified campus health professionals or emergency services when indicated. The teacher should not diagnose injury from video or compel students to disclose medical histories to peers. Local university policies, clinical recommendations, accessible facility requirements, and the individual student's needs take precedence over generalized teaching examples.

6. An Inclusive Twelve-Week Implementation Model

The proposed semester design keeps three outcomes visible throughout: functional racket-sport competence, autonomous and socially meaningful participation, and safe engagement. Modifications stay available across the whole course rather than being confined to a short introductory unit. The timetable assumes adaptation decisions can be revisited after observation and student feedback.

Table 3: Illustrative semester curriculum with inclusion checkpoints

Weeks	Teaching focus	Inclusive activity structure	Evidence of access and progress
1–2	Baseline needs, safe rally initiation, belonging	Choice of ball, court, partner rotation, multiple instructions	Participation opportunities and goal choice
3–4	Contact control, trajectory, simple scoring	Three challenge levels under one tactical objective	Task function relative to baseline
5–6	Space, recovery, and cooperative tactics	Adjustable movement area and role-based doubles	Decision opportunities and balanced partner roles
7–8	Serve/return, load awareness, self-direction	Scaled starts; distributed overhead practice	Effort checks and feasible self-set goals

Weeks	Teaching focus	Inclusive activity structure	Evidence of access and progress
9–10	Modified competition and social play	Rules emphasizing fair involvement and meaningful rallies	Engagement, confidence, and decision quality
11–12	Transfer to independent recreation	Students organize safe, appropriately scaled play	Demonstrated planning and post-course intention

In the opening lessons, students receive a neutral explanation that several versions of each activity are legitimate. They are invited to name preferred challenges, communication needs, and barriers without making sensitive disclosures in public. The instructor observes whether all students receive comparable chances to strike, decide, and participate socially. When a modification does not work, it should be revised collaboratively rather than defended as objectively suitable.

In the middle of the course, an inclusion checkpoint can ask whether students actually reached the intended learning opportunities. Simple counts of active rallies, time spent waiting, and frequency of involvement in doubles can expose imbalances that attendance alone hides. Group composition and scoring conditions can then be adjusted. Teachers should also ask whether students find the activities challenging, respectful, and close enough to the sport to be useful outside the course.

During the final weeks, students work toward a practical independence task: organizing a short recreational session for a small group, choosing an appropriate ball and court, agreeing on fair scoring, starting a warm-up, and explaining how to adjust intensity or task difficulty. This assessment reflects the course's participation-oriented aim. It should not require a high-speed conventional serve or a match win to prove readiness for lifelong recreation.

6.1. From a Modified Drill to a Self-Organized Racket-Sport Session

The final unit should offer a transfer task that stays meaningful for students whose preferred form of play uses a smaller court or lower-compression ball. Working in a small group, each student helps choose an appropriate playing format, explain simple rules, negotiate fair rotation, and adapt a task after a problem appears. The teacher separately observes whether the student engages with the racket-sport decision and can participate without a stream of commands. This assesses practical agency, not proficiency at imitating one expert stroke style.

A follow-up task several weeks after formal teaching can ask whether learners tried to arrange another session, what barriers arose, and whether the course equipped them to choose feasible alternatives. Those outcomes must be collected prospectively. Willingness expressed during a final class is not evidence of actual future play. If follow-up fails because students cannot reach courts or partners, program-level constraints should be reported instead of attributing the outcome solely to personal motivation.

7. Assessment That Is Fair, Specific, and Transparent

Inclusive assessment is not the same as handing identical scores for different observable performances. It requires stating what the course values, gathering relevant evidence, and making sure the assessment mode does not needlessly exclude legitimate ways to reach the outcome. In a participation-oriented course, technical control, tactical decisions, safe practice knowledge, and collaborative competence can be evaluated as separate criteria. Instructors should publish criteria early and let students practice with them before a high-stakes exam.

A robust scheme can combine a baseline-to-final improvement portfolio with criterion-referenced functional tasks. Students might demonstrate a playable rally under a suitable ball and court condition, explain a target choice, adjust a practice task after feedback, and lead a safe recreational warm-up. The teacher documents the adaptations used so interpretation stays transparent. Improvement should be recognized without lowering the educational meaning of the task.

Table 4: An inclusive evidence plan for campus racket sport outcomes

Outcome domain	Possible indicator	Assessment mode	Important limitation
Functional skill	Sustained playable exchanges and target control	Appropriately scaled on-court task	Performance depends on selected constraints
Tactical understanding	Justified choices based on ball and opponent	Live game, verbal explanation, or annotated diagram	Explanation alone cannot establish execution
Confidence and motivation	Goal ownership and willingness to participate	Brief student self-report	Self-report may be influenced by grade pressure
Social participation	Balanced involvement and cooperative play	Structured peer and teacher observation	Observation needs agreed coding rules
Safe independent practice	Appropriate warm-up and task adjustment	Student-organized recreational session	Classroom simulation does not prove long-term behavior

A composite course grade may be administratively necessary, but research analysis should report the domains separately. Using one index called "inclusive physical literacy" risks hiding opposing effects, such as better stroke performance alongside reduced belonging. Instruments and rubrics should be piloted for accessibility, clarity, and reliability in the actual student population.

8. Institutional Constraints and Critical Boundaries

Inclusive racket-sport pedagogy requires resources and institutional support. A teacher with one crowded court and a large group cannot provide continuous individualized coaching. Still, appropriate ball compression, temporary boundary markers, rotating roles, and clearly written station options can improve access without a full facility redesign. Program directors should plan equipment budgets, reasonable student-to-court ratios, and staff training rather than loading every responsibility onto individual teachers.

It is also important not to treat disability, beginner status, and low confidence as interchangeable categories. Some disabled students are experienced competitors; some nondisabled students need extensive introductory support. Students' accounts of what helps them participate should be respected, while safety decisions remain guided by professional judgment and institutional obligations. This dual commitment honors individual expertise about lived experience without shifting accommodation work entirely onto the learner.

The World Health Organization (2020) situates adult physical activity within broader health and participation goals. A single campus racket-sport course cannot satisfy all adult activity recommendations, and this framework does not claim that a twelve-week elective causes long-term health improvement. The university can create conditions for students to gain the skills, confidence, social connections, and knowledge that make future activity more feasible. Sustained participation must be measured after the course, not inferred from end-of-term enthusiasm.

8.1. A Prospective Evaluation with Process and Continuation Measures

An initial feasibility phase could audit access and role distribution in two or more course sections, letting instructors and students revise confusing indicators. Later comparative work could contrast a participation-pathway curriculum with a clearly described conventional elective while observing how often each learner receives a functional choice, gets ball contacts, and takes part in reciprocal pair roles. Interviews may clarify whether scaled equipment felt empowering or stigmatizing. Where possible, independent observers should code sessions without knowing the desired outcomes, and the analysis should explicitly report missing participation opportunities and uneven court allocation.

Longer-term outcomes must be separated from end-of-term perceptions. A short follow-up survey or interview could investigate actual recreational sessions undertaken after the course, ability to obtain equipment or find playing partners, and barriers that prevent continuation. Such findings would be descriptive until stronger comparative methods, appropriate sampling, and validated instruments are available. Researchers should avoid treating a physical-literacy questionnaire, a racket-sport stroke test, and an attendance record as interchangeable measures of inclusion.

Three propositions are deliberately falsifiable. First, accessible court formats will not improve inclusion if low-skill students still receive fewer eligible decisions in mixed doubles. Second, an autonomy-supportive choice is not useful if the selected task prevents recognizable racket-sport learning. Third, high course satisfaction does not establish continuation when facility costs, social access, or time remain prohibitive. These counterexamples matter because they locate failure in the interaction of learner, pedagogy, and institution instead of assuming every modification is beneficial.

9. RESEARCH AGENDA, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The framework generates several empirically testable questions. Does an inclusive, physical-literacy-oriented racket-sport course increase meaningful activity opportunities for students with lower entry-level competence? Are there differences in retention and tactical learning when challenge levels are adjusted without segregating learners? Which forms of student consultation produce acceptable and useful accommodations? Do intentions to play recreationally persist three or six months after course completion?

Future studies should combine observation of actual on-court access with student-reported experiences, validated measures where available, and follow-up behavior. Researchers should document adaptations and avoid lumping all students with disabilities into one category. Comparative evaluations also need to measure instructor workload, facility constraints, and unintended consequences, including stigmatization or inconsistent assessment. Any injury-related outcome would require appropriate exposure recording and adequate statistical power; an absence of observed injuries in a small class cannot establish prevention effectiveness.

A campus racket-sport course succeeds not only when students hit better strokes, but also when more of them can understand, enjoy, and continue the sport in a form that fits their circumstances. The proposed model integrates differentiated tasks, student agency, social inclusion, and proportionate safety practices while keeping credible standards for skill and tactical learning. Its promise is pedagogical and testable, not yet experimentally proven. Such an approach can shift the

question from who can meet one fixed racket-sport standard to how meaningful racket-sport competence can be developed and sustained across a diverse university population.

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