

University of Alabama World Games: A Student-Led Initiative

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Introduction

Community engagement at the University of Alabama (UA) is managed through the Division of Community Affairs, which promotes programs that enhance connections between students and the broader community. While most initiatives are coordinated by full-time staff, this paper explores a unique instance in which a student-led effort—supported by the Division of Community Affairs, and Scholars for Community Outreach, Partnership and Engagement (SCOPE)—successfully executed an intercultural sporting event. As an undergraduate student coordinating and pioneering a new community engagement initiative, the 2024 UA World Games, I seek to share a student perspective on an event that displays the opportunities offered by SCOPE.

The UA World Games idea stemmed from the 2022 World Games held in Birmingham, Alabama, which featured 34 sports and over 3,400 athletes from 99 nations. Modeled after the 2022 World Games, the UA World Games aimed to create a fun and interactive event that encouraged interaction between international and domestic students while promoting intercultural exchange and physical activity.

In the fall of 2023, I was serving as the president of the Education Abroad Alumni Association and was actively involved in international education, having studied abroad twice with three additional trips planned for the summer of 2024. In my role, I sought innovative ways to engage study abroad alumni, prospective study abroad students, and international students. The concept of recreating the World Games in a smaller format had been discussed within the office for over a year but had yet to come to fruition. I decided to take on the challenge, envisioning the UA World Games as a one-day event where students could try various sports featured in the 2022 World Games.

Selection of Sports

I selected six sports that I wanted to be included in the UA World Games that year: squash,

fistball, boules, floorball, tug of war, and flying disc. I wish I could say that I picked these sports for sophisticated and thoughtful reasons, but truthfully, I chose the lowest-contact sports that I felt would be approved by the university. After choosing these sports, I then set to conducting my research about each of them. I enjoyed this aspect of learning the rules and background of each sport, but my exposure to each game remained limited to watching videos online, so I still felt a little apprehensive about how I was going to teach people how to play the selected sports and how to teach referees to officiate them.

Budgeting and Funding

Securing funding was a critical first step. With limited prior budgeting experience, I found the process daunting but ultimately rewarding. To create a preliminary baseline budget, I needed to take the information I had collected on the sports and determine the necessary equipment. Then, I had to secure the funding.

Funding came from multiple sources. The first major contribution was a grant from the Student Government Association in partnership with the Division of Student Life. To receive this funding, I had to submit a detailed proposal outlining the event's objectives, attend training sessions, and participate in meetings to discuss the project's benefits to the campus community. Additionally, I consulted with a professor from the Department of Journalism and Creative Media who had previously received an Excellence in Engaged Teaching and Learning award from the University of Alabama Council on Community-Based Partnerships, and received funding for her work with digital media at the 2022 World Games. Recognizing the alignment between her work and the UA World Games, we agreed to allocate her award toward purchasing sporting equipment, which helped facilitate the planning and filming of instructional videos while awaiting other funding approvals.

Using these resources, plus funding from the Division of Community Affairs and the Student

Government Association, we were able to meet our budget that included meal vouchers for participants as well as all equipment necessary for the sports.

Promotional Efforts and Partnerships

Promotion and partnerships played a significant role in the event's success. To attract participants, I personally reached out to multicultural organizations, international student groups, fraternity and sorority life, and activity-based student organizations. However, I faced challenges such as unresponsive organizations and outdated contact information. While some groups initially expressed interest, they later disengaged, making it difficult to solidify commitments.

To bolster student participation, we aligned the UA World Games with existing university engagement incentives. The event was approved as a Greek Point activity, allowing sorority and fraternity members to earn required points for participation. The event was also recognized by the Student Government Association as a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) event due to the international aspect of games from around the world, which enabled students to earn DEI points to support their organizations.

I also wanted to create an intercultural experience by incorporating international cuisine. I established partnerships with two food trucks specializing in Arabian cuisine and poke bowls, which agreed to park at the event venue. To encourage student engagement with the cultural food offerings, we distributed meal vouchers covering up to \$15 per student. With additional budget allocations, we were able to distribute over 100 meal vouchers. Additionally, I designed informational posters explaining the cultural significance of the dishes available at the food trucks.

Another critical promotional effort involved creating instructional sports videos. A senior capstone class led by the professor I was collaborating with in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media took on this project—directing, filming, and editing tutorial videos for each of the six sports. The videos featured the school mascot, Big Al, and two university cheerleaders, making them both fun and informative. The filming process was a fast-paced effort, but within an hour, we successfully shot all six tutorials, including setup, gameplay, and takedown. Each video ended with a QR code that led to the registration site to encourage viewers who saw the tutorials to sign up to participate in the games.

Additionally, I took on the role of graphic

designer and created the UA World Games logo using Canva. Navigating university branding approvals through the Division of Strategic Communications was challenging, but once approved, we integrated the logo into promotional materials. The Education Abroad office supported these efforts by featuring the logo on their website and linking it to an online registration system. While social media promotion was concentrated in the weeks leading up to the event, in hindsight, an earlier marketing push could have increased participation. The major promotional push, though, was through SCOPE, and speaking at their meetings was critical for me to gather interested people as volunteers and participants.

Challenges and Adaptations

Despite thorough planning, several unexpected challenges arose. One significant issue was the lack of preregistrations. Despite leveraging multiple communication channels—including campus-wide digital screens, social media, and partnerships—only three students signed up in advance. This uncertainty created anxiety, as many external stakeholders—including study abroad providers and representatives from the US Fistball Association—were expecting a sizable turnout.

Additionally, financial logistics proved cumbersome. Our organization needed to set up a bank account and credit card to process funds, requiring multiple visits to the Student Government Association Financial Affairs Committee (FAC) and the Alabama Credit Union to ensure compliance with university regulations. Further, some sports required modifications due to university facility constraints. For example, fistball is traditionally played outdoors, but university rules prohibited the use of stakes on recreational fields. To adapt, we used existing volleyball net poles to create an indoor alternative.

Event Day and Outcomes

Despite initial uncertainties, the UA World Games exceeded expectations, with over 180 students participating throughout the day. While attendance did not follow the pre-planned schedule, students engaged in a dynamic, come-and-go format. Volunteers played a crucial role in recruiting passersby to join, contributing to the event's lively atmosphere. The event featured expert instruction from a representative of the US Fistball Association, an affiliate study abroad provider's information booth, and additional engagement opportunities like a Stanley cup

giveaway. Media coverage, including a feature on the local news, helped amplify the event's impact. Following the event's success, I was honored with an award recognizing my contributions to community engagement. The award included a grant to continue and expand the UA World Games initiative for 2025!

Conclusion

The UA World Games became a powerful reminder of what's possible when students take the lead in shaping their own campus experience. Through careful planning, strategic funding, and adaptive problem-solving, we transformed a vision into a reality, creating an inclusive space where international and domestic students could connect through sports. At times, the challenge felt overwhelming, but I learned that the key to overcoming obstacles lies in believing in yourself and surrounding yourself with people who uplift and support you. This experience showed me that student-led initiatives can be transformative. It reinforced that passion, resilience, and a commitment to community can turn even the most far-fetched ideas into something real. Ultimately, we, as students, have the power to create the change we want to see. The UA World Games stand as proof that no matter where you start or how many resources you have, you can build something meaningful, leaving a lasting impact on your campus and beyond.

About the Author

Carly Titus is a graduate student in the Center for Community-Based Partnerships at the University of Alabama.