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Berkley Henshaw  
*Valdosta State University*

James G. Archibald  
*Valdosta State University*

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## **The Benefits and Barriers of Physical Activity among College Students**

**By**

**Berkley Henshaw and James G. Archibald**

### **Abstract**

*The benefits and barriers of physical activity among college students play an important role in how to create a physically active environment (Brown, 2005). Many students feel the best benefit to exercising is to improve their physical appearance (English, 2007). Students have expressed that some of the barriers to physical activity are that recreational facilities are too far away, or the centers did not have activities in which students wanted to engage (Brown, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the benefits and challenges of physical activity for college students.*

According to the DHHS, one third of adults in the United States do not participate in enough physical activity (Coronado, Sos, Talbot, Do & Taylor, 2010). "Physical inactivity is a serious health problem among university students," (Irwin, 2007, p.40). This poses a great danger to students who have serious health issues. "Thirty-seven percent of the college student population is overweight, with 11% being obese," (Berg, An, Ahluwalia, 2013, p. 389). Even though the benefits of participating in physical activity are proven to increase psychological and physiological health, many college students do not meet the minimal recommendations for physical activity (Kilpatrick, Herbert & Bartholomew, 2005). Obesity has increased among college students due to lack of exercise and sedentary lifestyle, such as long periods of sitting and inactivity (Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond, 2009). "Specifically, weight gain in the first few years of college is becoming an important concern affecting the likelihood that more young adults are, or will become obese," (Gruber, 2008, p.557). On average, weight gain is greater among college students compared to the general population (English, 2009). However, students can improve their health by including exercise 5 days each week for 30 min (English, 2009). Students have an array of physical activity options available to them through campus recreational facilities; for example, recreational sports, games, weight lifting, swimming, or outdoor activities. These activities range from moderate to vigorous intensity levels (Coronado, Sos, Talbot, Do & Taylor, 2010). While it may appear simplistic to engage in these activities, there are challenges and barriers that can impede students from reaping the benefits of physical activity. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the benefits and challenges of physical activity for college students.

### **Sex Differences in Physical Activities**

According to English (2007), adults should engage in 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate activity, an hour and 15 minutes of vigorous intense workouts or a combination of the two every week. Moderate activities are those that cause an increase one's heart rate and breath, and are maintained for an hour. Workouts that are considered to be vigorous in intensity should make one fatigue after 20 minutes with intensified heart rate and breathing (Coronado, Sos, Talbot, Do & Taylor, 2010). However, there are sex differences that should be taken considered

when engaging in physical activities. According to Johan De Hartog, Boogaard, Nijland & Hoek (2012), young adults are encouraged to be active for 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity 5 days a week. According to Miller, Staten, Rayens & Noland (2005) male students are more likely to participate in vigorous activities while females are more likely to workout at moderate intensity.

Men in a fraternity or athletes are more likely to enjoy vigorous activities (Miller, Staten, Rayens & Noland, 2005). This may be due to the competitive nature of males. Competitive students enjoy being challenged and playing sports while less competitive students tend to focus on routine exercises to enhance their body image (Kilpatrick, Herbert & Bartholomew, 2005). Single students had a tendency to exercise more often than those who were in a relationship while females prefer to participate in moderately intense activities such as jogging or yoga (Kilpatrick, Herbert & Bartholomew, 2005). Overall students with good grades enjoyed moderate level workouts compared to those with lower grades. Regardless of gender, participating in any physical activity whether light, moderate, or vigorous is beneficial for all students.

### **Types of Physical Activity**

There are many different ways people are able to implement physical activity into their daily lives. People are able to become more active whether at home, work, or school. By adding a few activities into one's daily life, they are able to improve many aspects of their lives. Students living on campus are able to walk or ride a bike to class to enhance their health while students who commute tend to be less active. Many commuters feel they have less opportunity to be active (Miller, Staten, Rayens & Noland, 2005). However, they are able to enhance their physical activity by parking on the top floor of a parking deck and using the stairs. Miller, Staten, Rayens & Noland (2005) found that people who live on campus tend to do more moderate activity than those who lived off campus; this could be due to the usage of bikes, skateboards, and walking as a means of transportation. They are able to participate in the outdoor and wellness programs, intramurals activities or club sports (Suminski, Petosa, Utter, Zhang, 2002).

Determining the student's motivation is important when trying to influence active lifestyles. When looking at sports versus exercise, student's mindsets are very different. Students who are internally motivated enjoy sports when winning a game is the objective. Intrinsically motivated students enjoy the activity and how it makes them feel, while extrinsically motivated students seek the approval of others. According to Kilpatrick, Herbert & Bartholomew, (2005) research suggests that males are more interested in sports while females prefer exercise. This could be due to media influence and the pressure that is put on females to be thin and perfect as they emerge through adolescence. This negativity could follow them as they enter college.

Many females participate in aerobic activities to improve fitness such as walking, jogging, swimming, stretching, dancing, or yoga, while men enjoy more interactive activities (Get moving... for, 2003). Males also enjoy switching between different exercises, challenging themselves. Playing sports motivates and enhances students to engage in physical activity. People tend to play sports because of their connection with the sport versus the outcome of their body (Kilpatrick, Herbert & Bartholomew, 2005). Being physically active whether aerobic or anaerobic benefits the overall health of the student.

## **Benefits of Physical Activity for College Students**

According to McArthur & Raedeke, approximately 50% of college students do not believe they are partaking in enough physical activity. Thirty-three percent of those surveyed participate in some physical activity and 17% report no exercise in their daily regimen (McArthur & Raedeke, 2009). Students do not partake in physical activities even though the benefits are rewarding and vital to maintain a healthy life. The transitional period of adolescence and adulthood is where many individuals have a weight change (Nelson, Gortmaker, Subramanian, Cheung & Wechsler, 2007).

When looking at college students, physical inactivity is a major health issue. By being inactive, individuals could be shortening their lifespan. Some of the later serious causes of the inactivity are heart disease and mortality (Irwin, 2007). Daily exercise can reduce the probability of having illnesses such as strokes, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, depression, certain types of cancer, arthritis, and falls (Harms, 2012). These illnesses create burdens on oneself, family, and ultimately the health care system (Nelson, Gortmaker, Subramanian, Cheung & Wechsler, 2007). Individuals can reduce medical interventions and medical costs by maintaining a daily exercise routine. As students begin working out routinely, their bodies will change and begin to develop muscle tone and strength while improving their cardiovascular system (Irwin, 2007).

Some of the medical benefits of exercising are the production of serotonin which enhances one's mood (McGovern, 2005). When student's workout their bodies absorb food, this in turn encourages digestion, which increases one's metabolic rate. This action in the body instantly provides positive effect on one's mood. McGovern stated that physically active people are able to recover quickly from depression or other psychological illnesses. The brain also releases endorphins which minimizes pain and stress. If a student is stressed, they are able to relieve that stress by being active. Physical activity also increases the mental health as individual's age (McGovern, 2005). If a student exercises early in the morning, they are able to improve their mental health and be more alert throughout the day.

In addition to mental health, enhancement of physical appearance is also a benefit of physical activity. According to English (2007), research has shown that both male and female college students state the main reason for exercising is to improve physical appearance. When students are more confident with their looks, their mood is enhanced. This positive and energized feeling one experiences after exercising provides motivation for continuing to participate in the activity (Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond, 2009).

Social surroundings may also affect student's willingness to exercise. According to Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond (2009), social influence may be seen as a motivator or barrier depending on the student's peers. The results of the study indicated that friends were found to be a key motivator in exercising. They feel as if their friendships strengthen by having an exercising partner. Students are able to be in contact with more friends and enjoy socializing as they workout (Brown, Huber & Bergman, 2006).

## **Barriers of Physical Activity**

The perceived barriers of physical activity vary with every age group, especially among college students. Many students lack the motivation to be active. Leisure physical activities are

not highly looked upon among college students (Brown, Huber & Bergman, 2006). The United States has faced a dramatic increase in obesity with over one third of adults being obese (Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond, 2009). Male college students are more likely to be overweight than females (Nelson, Gortmaker, Subramanian, Cheung & Wechsler (2007). It could be the case that male college students who are overweight may feel insecure going into a workout facility and being around their physically fit peers. A workout facility may be a barrier in itself. In a study conducted by Brown (2005), the respondents stated that the exercise facilities were too far away, had irregular operating hours, did not have type of physical activity they wanted to engage, or facilities were not located in safe locations. Institutions that are located in a surrounding metropolis may have a location issue in regards to safety (Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond, 2009).

Time constraints can also be barriers to physical activities (Coronado, Sos, Talbot, Do & Taylor, 2010). With coursework and extracurricular activities, students may have limited time in their schedules to workout. The amount of time it takes to work out and prepare for the day may not be appealing. Students who believe they are too busy with their classes, work responsibilities, and social life have a tendency to forego exercising. Social influence can be seen as a barrier or benefit. Students may find their peers to be either a motivator or enabler (Bragg, Carolyn, Kaye & Desmond, 2009). According to Brown (2005), if students do not have a workout partner they are less likely to participate in physical activities. Some students will not exercise if their friends do not do so as well. Although some students may make excuses for their lack of engaging in exercise, campus recreational centers provide possibilities to eliminate these reasons.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the benefits and barriers of physical activity among college students play an important role in how to create a physically active environment (Brown, 2005). Research studies have provided supporting evidence that participating in some type of physical exercise is beneficial. Many universities provide students with health related resources. Recreation centers provide students with basic equipment for cardio and strength training as well as information and programming to promote healthy living. Becoming involved in intramural or club sports is another great way to stay fit and strengthen ones endurance and build self-esteem.

Using the resources that are provided and establishing healthy habits is important during the time in which college students are developing. Working out has been shown to improve moods and helping students feel better physically. It is also a great way to socialize with their peers by doing an activity together. Student's should evaluate their daily lifestyle and incorporate more activity into their days when possible. To improve the activity among college students, recreation and wellness centers should generate creative ideas to better market what they have to offer for students. These centers should focus on getting the attention of the freshmen students to promote healthy living as soon as the student arrives at college. They are able to maintain the student's interest by providing new programs or popular programs more often. Creating intramural sports or providing sports more regularly, they are able to maintain the interest of the students. Students want to feel appreciated and enjoy receiving incentives; creating incentive programs at the beginning of the year could increase activity within the program.

In conclusion, student affairs professionals should encourage students to be physically active and foster and develop healthy lifestyles. Students' first year of college is a very

influential time in their college matriculation, and thus students may be more susceptible to encouragement of maintaining a daily routine of physical activity. For example, housing and residence life staff can have discussions with their residents; during orientation by orientation staff, or have campus recreational staff have an open house event or visit a first year student forum/class. With a combined effort from student affairs professionals, the message of developing and maintaining physically active lifestyles will be heard by students.

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*Berkley Henshaw is a second year graduate student, pursuing a M.Ed. in Higher Education Leadership at Valdosta State University (VSU). Berkley serves as a Graduate Assistant for Weight Training and Front Desk Operations in the Campus Recreation Center at VSU. Additionally, she is also a fitness instructor teaching classes in cycling and high intensity interval training. Berkley has a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech Language Pathology from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.*

*James G. Archibald is an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator for the Higher Education & Student Affairs program at Valdosta State University. Dr. Archibald holds a Doctorate of Philosophy degree in Higher Education Administration and Student Affairs from Ohio University, a Master of Science degree in Guidance and Counseling from Austin Peay State, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Morehouse College.*