College/University Physical Activity Instruction Programs: A Critical Piece in the Education of Young Adults

A Position Paper from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education

It is the position of the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and the College and University Physical Education Council (CUPEC) that all colleges and universities uphold a physical activity instructional program for students as a strong and integral part of the academic curriculum. Bombarded by popular culture, newfound freedom, and peer pressure, the college-aged student is at high risk of making unhealthy choices.

The American College Health Association reports that on average, 35 percent of students on college campuses are overweight or obese (2006). In addition, an even larger percentage of college students (46%) are attempting to lose weight, suggesting false perceptions regarding personal weight and body image (Lowry, Galuska, Fulton, Wechsler, Kann, & Collins, 2000). Of the 46 percent who attempt weight loss, only one out of three report receiving any education from their college or university regarding physical activity and healthy dietary guidelines. Uninformed, we have found that college students choose unhealthy and non-recommended methods for weight loss. This is not surprising as we have learned that students as early as the middle school level formulate inaccurate and incomplete notions regarding physical activity and fitness (Kulinna & Zhu, 2001; Placek, Griffin, Dodds, Raymond, Tremino, & James, 2001).

In addition, college students' activity patterns mirror that of society's progressive decline in physical activity. We know the most rapid decline in physical activity happens during late adolescence and early adulthood. As ninth graders, 69 percent participate in recommended levels of vigorous activity on a regular basis. By twelfth grade, the number of young people participating in vigorous activity drops to 55 percent (Grunbaum et al., 2004) and by college age, the number participating in regular, leisure time activity drops to 36.6 percent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006). To add to this profile of inactivity, it has been found that physical activity patterns practiced by college seniors remain static for up to six years post graduation (Sparling & Snow, 2002). Eighty-one percent of inactive college students report that their activity patterns are the same or even less once they leave their educational institution.

It is also interesting to note that barriers to keep one from participating in physical activity increase as grade level increases (Gyurcsik, Spink, Bray, Chad, & Kwan, 2006). First-year college students have reported both intrapersonal as well as environmental/contextual barriers relative to physical activity. In particular,

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college students have identified high workloads at school and at their job as a reason for inactivity. They have also reported community barriers such as lack of specific sports teams to join at their college or university and lack of transportation to facilities.

Succeeding the K-12 physical education experience, a college/university physical activity instructional program can promote added experiences of physical activity as well as challenge preconceived notions of fitness and health. By offering programs that encourage choice, college physical activity programs can provide a vehicle for students to continue to engage in new and different physical activity opportunities that will encourage healthy lifetime practices. By offering programs that teach empirically supported behavior change methods, college physical activity programs can provide opportunities for college students to acquire skills needed to succeed in self-directed activity. Behavior change methods can assist in overcoming the variety of barriers that are faced by the college-aged student. An education in behavior change methods can build confidence in the college student's ability to be physically active when starting a career and family. Through careful curriculum planning, a college/university activity program can also target those groups in the greatest health risk such as the inactive student. An increase in daily physical activity can enable college students to reduce total cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (Merrill & Friedrichs, 1990), increase bone mass (Davee, Rosen, & Adler, 1990; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), decrease test anxiety and depression (Bartlett, 2006), and improve overall self-esteem. The benefits of physical activity at any age can help to strengthen muscles and joints, increase flexibility, and improve balance and agility, all of which are known to deteriorate with age (Katsumura & Hinman, 1997).

Effective college/university physical activity instructional programs can also highlight and nurture a participant's intrinsic reasons for physical activity. Young adults who are distracted by society's external stimuli and motives, are especially at high risk of losing touch with the intrinsic joy of movement (Kimiecik, 2005). Physically active individuals who choose to play for extrinsic reasons such as conference titles, trophies, or attention are found to be more at risk of becoming sedentary as adults. Some sport scientists and exercise physiologists suggest that the competitive college athlete who plays for extrinsic rewards will often possess declining activity levels once organized competition is over. It is imperative that all college students experience an education in lifetime activities where they may embrace the intrinsic value of activity prior to the end of their college career. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to sustain activity throughout their life.

As higher education seeks to promote and affirm adulthood, attributes such as personal growth, a sense of identity, and an increase in personal responsibility are essential goals of an academic institution (Rogers, 1996). An effective college/university physical activity instructional program will provide an avenue

for young adult learners to engage in a process of self reflection and personal emotional growth. Knowles (1990) suggests that, for children, life experiences are something that happens to them; however for adults, life experiences serve to determine who they are. It begins to shape their sense of self-identity. Worpole (1996) suggests that physical activity as a leisure pursuit is a major form of self expression and personal identity. When people spend their leisure time being active, they are more likely to express themselves in relationship to that activity (e.g., a person describing himself/herself as an avid golfer or fitness runner). On average, Americans are spending approximately 4.5 to 5 hours at play or in recreation/leisure activities each day (NASPE, n.d.). Businesses and agencies compete to provide the active adult with quality opportunities for recreation and leisure. Recognizing these issues, the college/university physical activity instructional program can provide the young adult with knowledge in physical activities that can be used in times of relaxation and as a means to shape their individuality.

Some have argued that it is just as easy for students to take activity classes at local organizations and health clubs. It has been quoted that those individuals who feel competent as movers and have a beginning foundation in the skills of various sport activities are more likely to participate outside of schooling (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2007). Quality K-12 physical education programs aim to promote confident, fundamentally skilled participants. However, because of a national trend in improving state academic scores, K-12 physical education time has sadly been reduced. The need for strong college/university physical activity instructional programs has never been so apparent. College/university physical activity instructional programs can provide students with the opportunity to develop their repertoire of movement talents. In addition, it may be the last time that students can receive education relative to physical activity before costly health club memberships become the only option.

The benefits of a quality physical activity instructional program are many. In educating the student who will be successful and well rounded, and make strong life choices, it is essential that colleges and universities continue the K-12 education regarding health and physical education. According to the college/university physical activity instruction guidelines published by NASPE (1998), an appropriate and sound college/university physical activity instructional program is a program that: (1) has education as its central mission, (2) has a health-related physical activity/skill acquisition emphasis, (3) offers a variety of physical activity courses to reflect individual interests, (4) echoes societal needs, and (5) promotes safe and lifelong participation in health-enhancing physical activity. (Refer to the NASPE/CUPEC web site for more specific guidelines.)

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