

# Building Camaraderie with Fun, Fitness, and Friendly Competition

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*A fitness-challenge competition can improve relations among professional colleagues and their students.*

A physical education department within a college or university is often the home of a variety of academic majors. Physical education departments no longer consist of only physical education teacher education students. Instead, they include diverse programs such as exercise science and athletic training. Although all of these programs, as well as the faculty and students associated with each of them, are housed within one department, each has its own program criteria and academic demands. Due to the individual demands and complexity of each program, the faculty and students in large departments often become disengaged from those outside of their own major and from the happenings within a department. They become deeply involved in their specific work demands and in meeting all of the individual program criteria. As the years go by, students, faculty, and staff often become isolated in their own programs, thus diminishing the interaction and camaraderie they could have with students and faculty within the other programs housed in the physical education department. The problem is that students and faculty lose opportunities to collaborate with other health-related professionals, build networks outside of their own academic focus, and engage in rewarding activities that promote interaction among these various subdivisions.

In conjunction with building camaraderie and interaction between the various programs, another desirable goal of a physical education department is to promote physical fitness. It is the department's responsibility to assist students who have selected a health-related profession to adopt healthy lifestyles and wellness goals. As stated by Peterson, Byrne, and Cruz (2003), "Part of being a physically educated person includes being physically fit and knowing the benefits of a physically active lifestyle" (p. 5). Educators, therefore, should instill wellness goals in students and assist in the promotion of physical activity.

To help promote fitness and healthy lifestyles among future educators and health care professionals, many colleges and universities have incorporated fitness assessments. Some departments have made the fitness assessment an undergraduate graduation require-



Fitness challenge participants build camaraderie as they log in the miles and motivate the department chair in her run to retirement.

ment (Peterson et al., 2003). A survey of physical education department chairpersons from 70 schools across the United States identified that 76 percent felt an obligation to assess the fitness levels of their majors (Staffo & Stier, 2000). According to Staffo and Stier, approximately 31 percent of physical education departments require their teacher certification majors to take and pass a fitness test before graduation. The problem is that the fitness assessment does not promote fitness as a fun and interactive method to obtain a healthy lifestyle. Many students view the fitness assessment as simply another test they must pass to graduate.

One way to address both problems may be to implement a department-wide fitness challenge. A departmental fitness challenge could assist in addressing the issues of health, fitness, collaboration, and camaraderie among students, faculty, and staff. Encouraging students to participate in the development and implementation of the fitness challenge could increase their interest and commitment for collegiality, organizational skills, and motivation to promote and participate in fitness activities. Faculty and staff can demonstrate their support of physical fitness, camaraderie, and interactions with the students in a learning environment outside of the classroom by also participating in the fitness challenge.

The purpose of this article is to provide a template for the development of a fitness challenge in a diverse department setting. First, the authors will discuss the importance and rewards of faculty/staff and student interaction outside the formal academic environment. Then they will introduce general step-by-step procedures used to engage the students in the planning and implementation of an annual, team-event fitness challenge. The article concludes with generalized results of challenges and tips on making it a successful event.

## Faculty and Student Interaction

The interaction a student has with professionals in the field has been shown to affect attrition and student learning (Clark, Walker, & Keith, 2002; Cokley, 2000; Dodge, Mitchell, & Mensch, 2006; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Woodside, Wong, & Weist, 1999). Students who had positive experiences and encouragement from faculty were more likely to have a higher academic self-concept and higher academic motivation scores (Cokley, 2000). Barrett (1995) concluded that change among students while on campus is largely due to the interactions that they have on a personal level with their teachers. Therefore, "it seems more important to focus on the particular kinds of campus experiences, as opposed to resources, that produce truly significant educational change" (p. 3). Barrett also identified that "college faculty are critical to the process of improving college" (p. 4).

Interactions with faculty have been identified as strong predictors of student learning and success (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students who frequently interact with faculty are more satisfied with their total college experience (Woodside et al., 1999). Even faculty members who interact with students outside of the classroom report greater satisfaction and are more likely to be evaluated by peers and students as outstanding teachers (Clark et al., 2002). Faculty and staff members become mentors, role models, and professional acquaintances for the students they serve. Therefore, the more interactions faculty members can initiate with students outside of the formal classroom environment, the better the overall college experience will be for the students.

It is not only important for students to interact with faculty, but for them to interact with peers. Clark et al. (2002) have suggested that "the influence of peers is the most significant variable that impacts out-of-class experiences" (p. 826). Peer interactions have been shown to have a significant influence on student learning (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). Therefore, establishing an out-of-class experience, such as a department fitness challenge, could result in building more camaraderie and interactions across academic majors while engaging in fun, fitness, and friendly competition.

## Implementing Fitness Challenge Events

The template for the development of a fitness challenge includes the following: (1) developing the specific fitness event, (2) establishing rules and regulations, (3) deciding whether awards will be given, (4) selecting a date for the event, (5) reserving the facility, (6) promoting the event, (7) recruiting and coordinating teams, (8) completing waiver forms, (9) coordinating activities for the event, (10) preparing equipment and supplies including first aid responders with a medical kit and AED, (11) securing judges, and (12) enlisting individuals to record results.

Planning a fitness challenge event begins with the development of the specific fitness activities. The selected activities must be of interest to potential participants, inclusive of all fitness levels, safe for all individuals, and fun. Challenges



Sit-ups and push-ups were chosen as two of the ten decathlon events in the fitness challenge to enhance the objectives of the department's fitness assessment exam.

can include traditional or less traditional activities as long as they meet the criteria listed above. For example, the challenge could be two hours of continuous movement on a treadmill. Teams of four would track the miles covered over a two-hour time limit with no member of the team participating for more than 30 minutes. Participants from all student groups, faculty, and staff would take part in this event by registering in teams.

Another example is to have a fitness decathlon for teams of four. Each member of the team must participate in two of the events, with the entire team involved in the final two events, which would be an obstacle course and relay race. The events would be chosen to enhance the objectives of the department's fitness assessment exams. They could include push-ups, sit-ups, a sit-up with a medicine ball toss for distance, jumping rope, a shuttle run, a long distance run, a medicine ball lift, a squat with a medicine ball squeeze, an obstacle course, and a final relay race. A third example with a less traditional focus is to have a pool event, in which fully clothed teams of four must maneuver across the pool in a timed team event using rescue boards, noodles, and canoes.

Athletic training majors, fitness majors, or members of professional organizations could assist in the planning, promotion, and management of the event. In this first step it is key to start the planning process early, involve as many students as possible in the planning process, and recruit participants from all fitness and discipline levels.

The second step in planning the fitness challenge consists of establishing the rules and regulations for the fitness activities. Team events are chosen to best meet the objective of building relationships among students, faculty, and staff. While developing the rules it is important to make sure the event is safe and simple, and that it can include multiple skill and fitness levels. To provide a fair opportunity for all participants, age-adjustments are given to faculty and staff.

One method could be to adjust the individual events, such as modifying the push-up for participants over the age of 40. Another method could be to provide older teams with point handicaps. These handicaps could be determined by taking the total number of points possible and dividing by the total number of teams and adding these points to the older participants' final score.

In establishing the rules and regulations, the target audience must be defined as well. Limiting the target audience to faculty, staff, and student majors within the same department will help improve the interactions among students who sit in the same classrooms everyday and yet may not interact with one another. Limiting the target audience will also prevent the event from getting too large.

The third consideration given to establishing a fitness challenge is whether a prize will be awarded to the winning team. A wall-mounted plaque with a name plate for the winning team may be awarded in recognition of the team's efforts. The recognition plaque may also be used to promote future fitness challenges, while keeping the event in the minds of students, faculty, and staff. Openly displaying the plaque encourages future participants to engage in physical activity in preparation for the next year's fitness challenge.

Selecting a date and reserving the facility should not be overlooked as the fourth and fifth steps. To enhance the recruitment efforts and the inclusion factor, seek advice from the student group leaders, faculty, and department chairperson, and check the athletics schedule to determine the best date with the least potential for conflict. Avoid scheduling it on the day immediately before or after a holiday or a major sporting event like the Super Bowl. When reserving the facility, approach the head of the department and seek cooperation by explaining the intention of the fitness-related event.

The sixth step is to promote of the event. Once the event,

Figure 1. Waiver for Participation Form

First Annual Fitness Challenge – 2004  
Waiver for Participation Form

**2004 Theme:** “Running to Retirement” Please help us in bidding Dr. P a wonderful and restful retirement.

**When:** Friday March 26th

**Where:** Fitness Center

**Time:** Set up a two-hour time block between 8:00 – 2:00

**Course:** Flat and fast on a treadmill

**Registration:** No fee

**Awards:** Team to complete most number of miles in the two-hour block will have their names inscribed on a plaque to be displayed in the Physical Education Department lobby showcase.

Please complete the information below:

Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_ First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone #: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: \_\_\_M \_\_\_F

**Waiver:** I know that participating in a team run/walk for time is a potentially hazardous activity. I should not enter or participate unless I am medically able and properly trained. I agree to abide by the decision of the event organizer relative to my ability to safely complete the run or walk. I assume all risk associated with running in this event including, but not limited to: falls, contact with the treadmill, and all other risk associated in participating in such an event. Having read this waiver, knowing these facts, and in consideration of accepting my entry, I, for myself and anyone entitled to act on my behalf, waive and release Western Illinois University and all event officials and agents, all sponsors, their representatives and successors from all claims or liabilities of any kind arising out of my participation in this event, even though that liability may arise out of negligence or carelessness on the part of the persons named in this waiver.

**Participant's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

date, and rules have been established, begin promoting it to others. Describe the past years' events, the fun associated with it, and all the participants who were involved. Post flyers that advertise the fitness challenge with the contact information of a person who can give more details if needed. Include the who, what, when, and where of the event. Appoint student representatives to go to various student group meetings to explain the event and encourage participation. Encourage faculty and students to promote the event in their various classes.

The seventh step in the planning and implementation of a fitness challenge event is the recruitment and coordination of teams. The answers to a number of questions will determine how this is done. Will the teams organize themselves and register together, or should the event planners organize balanced teams from among the pool of participants? Should teams pit groups (faculty, students, and different majors) against one another, or should the teams consist of mixed groups? Will the teams adopt names and elect a captain?

Will the teams be identified with numbers on their shirts or by some other method?

Step eight involves the completion of waiver forms. Information regarding the fitness challenge and a copy of a specific participation waiver are provided to the team members who register for the event. Each participant must sign a waiver form that identifies the safety issues and possible injuries that could result from their participation in the event (figure 1). All participants should be informed that the events may be strenuous in nature. Depending on department policy and the types of events included in the fitness challenge, obtaining medical clearance may be advised before participation. However, since a goal of the fitness challenge is to include participants with a variety of fitness levels, modification of the activities (i.e. walking vs. running, modified vs. standard push-ups) should be encouraged in order to give everyone the opportunity to participate. Each institution may have specific guidelines in this area of risk management. Check with the department chairperson for a waiver form, otherwise



The emphasis was on fun as participants engaged in the team obstacle race.

the intramurals department most likely has a sample copy that could be used as a template for your event.

As the date of the fitness challenge approaches, the ninth step is to coordinate activities for the event. The students who are implementing and judging the event should be assembled to perform a test run of the fitness challenge. This will assist in determining what difficulties may arise in specific fitness activities. The event coordinator should analyze, consider, plan, and explore how the group will react to unexpected events during the challenge. By trying to anticipate “worst case scenarios,” event administrators will be better prepared for unforeseen mishaps that may occur during the actual event. During the test run of the event, multiple observers can assist in anticipating problems and can provide their expertise for possible solutions. A practice run of the event should be completed not only to anticipate any potential problems but to modify the event if necessary. The student staff charged with implementing the event should take part in the practice run and have the opportunity to ask questions.

The tenth step is to develop a list of needed equipment and supplies. This list should be created from the start of the planning process, and items should be added to it as the event approaches. Important items that are often overlooked are first aid supplies and access to water. The first aid items for consideration should include bleeding-control supplies, ice for injuries, an AED, and a telephone in case an emergency call must be made. To be certain the event is safely managed, a trained first aid responder should be present throughout the event.

The eleventh step, which must not to be overlooked, concerns the judges of the event. These will generally be the students who planned and organized the fitness challenge. However, to make the judging more fun, “celebrity” judges could be invited to the event. These are individuals who have a certain familiarity with all the fitness challenge participants. Examples of celebrity judges include the president of the university, the department chairperson, or popular

faculty members. Make sure the judges have familiarized themselves with the rules and procedures. The judges play a key role and must be well versed in the process of how the event is to be run and how the results will be expressed and communicated to the teams.

The twelfth and final step includes recording the results and identifying the winners of the fitness challenge. This can be as simple as posting the results in a central location, such as on a bulletin board or in a display case. Team members often want to see the results so they can compare their scores with those of the winners. Participants may want to linger at the event until it is completely over to obtain the results and to determine whether their team is the winner. Consideration should be given to this final step to avoid spreading incorrect information among the teams. For example, if a team, immediately following the conclusion of the event, was given unofficial results indicating they were the winners, and then a miscalculation in the scoring was later discovered, it would be awkward to inform the team that there was an error in the premature information they received. Keep the results private until they have been double-checked and certified by the event planners.

At the conclusion of the fitness challenge, recognize and thank all participants. Public acknowledgement and recognition can be enhanced with a display case or bulletin board that features the participants and their accomplishments. This will help the recruiting efforts for the following year. Remember, it is very important to make the events chosen for the fitness challenge as inclusive as possible and to celebrate those individuals who agree to participate. When an event becomes too competitive, those with lower levels of fitness will eventually feel excluded and choose not to participate.

### Generalized Results from Fitness Challenge Events

The examples provided in this article have already been used by the Western Illinois University Physical Education Department to develop and implement an annual fitness challenge to promote camaraderie among the department’s faculty and students. The generalized results presented here come from those fitness challenge events and are described to help demonstrate the success of these events. The key to the event is to get as many people involved as possible and to have all academic majors in the department represented by students and several faculty members who teach in each of the disciplines. The emphasis is not on winning, but on inclusion and the development of fitness.

The fitness challenge was initiated by the director of the Athletic Training Education Program as a service project to the department. Its purpose was to include all major groups housed in the Physical Education Department, to bring some fun to the department, to focus on the goal of interaction across the disciplines and between students and faculty, and to incorporate fitness-related activities. More than 66 faculty, staff, and students have participated in the fitness challenge

over the three years since its inception. Participants between the ages of 18 and 61 years, with fitness levels ranging from the average walker to marathon runner, have competed in the event. Teams representing students from the various majors in the department as well as faculty, equipment attendants, custodial workers, and administrative assistants have been actively involved in some of the challenges.

Evaluation of the overall success of this event has been based on three main questions. First, did the teams have fun participating in the fitness challenge? Second, did the event provide opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to interact with one another? Third, was the event challenging enough to promote fitness-related outcomes? When participants answered yes to all three questions, the event was deemed successful. If participants had negative feedback, their comments were written down, evaluated, and taken into consideration during the following year's planning process of the fitness challenge. Current outcomes of the fitness challenge have proven the event to be fun, successful at providing interaction between the participants, and positive in promoting fitness-related activities.

### Suggested Event Strategies and Tips

Past participants have offered many ideas for consideration. These include developing both competitive and noncompetitive events for all fitness levels and adjusting the events for age-related differences. Some participants felt that keeping the teams segregated (e.g., graduate assistants versus undergraduate students versus faculty members) would make the activities more fun, while others suggested creating teams that include at least one faculty member, one graduate assistant, and one student from each undergraduate major, to promote more interaction among the participants.

Another suggestion was to secure a sponsor or charge an entry fee for the event or for each team. The idea behind the sponsorship or entry fee was to provide t-shirts to all participants. Through sponsorship or entry fees, a percentage of the proceeds could also be used to purchase an item for the fitness center or that could be used by the students in the department.

Some participants also suggested the addition of a post-challenge social activity. Following the fitness challenge, each team could be invited to enjoy food, beverages, and socialization with all participants. This would allow students, staff, and faculty to continue to build camaraderie outside of the classroom and the competitive setting.

The final suggestion was to use a post-fitness challenge evaluation tool. As a means to improve the activities that are used in the program, each fitness challenge could be evaluated to determine whether it is an effective way of building camaraderie. The best time to evaluate the event's strengths and weaknesses is immediately following the conclusion of the event. Participants', judges', and the planning committee's input on the success of the event and needed improvements could be systematically solicited. One suggestion was to provide each participant with a written evalu-

ation survey tool. Feedback regarding specific components of the events as well as general concerns could be collected and reviewed.

### Conclusion

A fitness challenge can help build camaraderie among the students, faculty, and staff of diverse physical education departments. The benefits from participating in such an event can include an increased sense of belonging, better collegiality between peers, more familiarity and interaction with instructors outside the academic classroom, and the promotion of fun fitness-related activities. By engaging students in the planning, implementation, participation, and evaluation of fitness-related activities such as a fitness challenge, a physical education department's goal of student interaction across multiple disciplines can be achieved.

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