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LIFE & STYLE

Colleges Are Tracking When Students Work Out at Rec Centers

Amid a Building Boom, Schools Mine Data to Justify Their Spending and Tailor Their Offerings to Undergrad Demand

Officials on college campuses are turning to usage data and student feedback to shape fitness programs, hoping it will entice more students to develop healthy habits.
Kirk Irwin/WSJ

By **RACHEL BACHMAN**

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UCLA discovered its recreation center drew 43,734 unique visitors last year, or almost 5,000 more than its student enrollment. Purdue University discovered students who worked out more often had

higher GPAs.

That is some of the research colleges are mining amid criticism of a building boom of gyms with rock-climbing walls and specialty swimming pools. Working to justify their expenditures, schools are tracking student habits and changing their programming based on their findings.

Scenes From College Rec Centers »

A Look at How Drastically Exercise on Campus Has Changed



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The old recreation center at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., was mostly un-air-conditioned—but it did have an archery range. *PURDUE RECREATIONAL SPORTS*

UCLA uses an app called GymFlow that allows students to see how crowded specific areas in its recreation center are before they go and avoid long waits, says Mick Deluca, assistant vice chancellor of campus life. UCLA also offers employee memberships, which helps explain last

year's visitor tally.

Purdue in West Lafayette, Ind., recently replaced its half-century old rec center with a \$98 million, 470,000-square foot facility. Usage surged. But Purdue officials noticed another trend using data from students scanning in their ID cards when they entered the facility: Those who exercised more got better grades.

Students in fall 2013 who made no visits to recreation facilities averaged GPAs of 3.07, while those making 64 visits or more in a semester averaged 3.20, officials said. Students completing their first semester at Purdue who visited rec facilities 15 times or more earned 3.08 GPAs, compared with 2.81 for those who made no visits.

A separate study by assistant professor Christopher Slaten in Purdue's college of education compared 100 students enrolled in semester-long yoga or kickboxing classes with 100 students similar in gender, class year and race who made no visits to the rec center. After 16 weeks, the fitness-class students showed significantly lower stress levels than their peers and higher confidence in managing their social lives.

The fitness-class students also improved their grades significantly over the semester, meaning that even previously strong students made gains. Dr. Slaten and his research team are preparing to submit the study to a peer-reviewed academic journal.

North Carolina State University students play Battleship, which involves trying to swamp opponents' canoes. *JASMINE JACK/NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY*

Leah Franklin, a junior at Ohio State University, said she was initially overwhelmed by the school's 570,000-square-foot recreation center. The glass-walled building features a massive gym space, a jungle of weight racks and a so-called cardio canyon with treadmills and elliptical machines. Ms. Franklin tried a cycling class, got hooked and now attends classes almost every day.

"I love TRX, cardio kickbox, circuit cycle," Ms. Franklin says, listing a few of the two dozen types of classes that Ohio State offers.

On a recent weekday afternoon in Columbus, students queued up for a circuit cycle class that alternated between stationary cycling and strength exercises. Total visits to group-fitness classes at OSU jumped 68% between 2012 and 2014, while enrollment rose 3%.

While previous generations of college students might have mixed in the occasional softball game amid test cramming and late-night pizza, the current one has grown up amid a fitness and wellness boom. Many students arrive on campus with workout habits. "They understand the critical importance of physical activity," says Don Stenta, OSU's director of student life recreational sports.

The rock climbing wall at Purdue University's new rec center. *PURDUE UNIVERSITY*

About 75% of U.S. students use on-campus rec centers, facilities or programs in a given year, according to NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation, the group formerly called the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association.

Some university recreation departments have just recently met the

demand for fitness classes from female students, now the majority on most campuses. At North Carolina State University in Raleigh, more students participate in group fitness classes than in traditional fare like intramural teams. N.C. State tripled the number of its weekly fitness classes to 150—far more than many commercial health clubs—two years ago.

“There was this idea that IM [intramural] sports was driving the industry, but that really wasn’t the case,” says Heather Sanderson, N.C. State’s associate director for university recreation.

University of Florida graduate students started complaining a few years ago that they weren’t getting enough from their required student-activity fee. They wanted to stop paying it.

The school examined the data from student-ID scans and noticed that a significant share of people at the main recreation center’s 7 a.m. opening were graduate students. Officials moved up the opening to 6 a.m. The complaints died down, says Pam Hightower, an assistant director of administrative services for UF recreational sports.

“We weren’t just moving the people from one hour to the next,” Ms. Hightower says. “We were attracting new, unique people.”

Rec department offerings are more diverse than ever, from scuba classes at the University of Wisconsin to instruction in 15 martial arts disciplines at UCLA, including muay thai and Brazilian jujitsu.

Ohio State has held a Harry Potter-themed cycle class and Downton Abbey yoga to appeal to people who might not visit the rec center

regularly, Dr. Stenta says. In the coming weeks Portland State University in Portland, Ore., is holding a zombie dodgeball game on Halloween as an alternative to alcohol-fueled parties and a women's night at its rock-climbing wall to encourage newcomers.

“We really have this moral obligation to be good stewards of this money,” says Alex Accetta, Portland State's director of campus recreation, of the rec fees required of students on campuses nationwide.

Nationwide data about student-recreation fees are scarce. But 10 schools in the Big Ten Conference, a collection of large, mostly Midwestern universities, charged students an average of \$135 per semester last year, according to the University of Wisconsin.

Intramural sports like flag football and soccer remain popular for men in particular, along with open-gym activities like basketball. But non-sport fitness activities are driving industry growth, says Ian Leopold, president and CEO of American Collegiate Intramural Sports & Fitness, a New York company that connects university recreation departments with corporate sponsors.

Last summer, American Collegiate Intramural Sports added “& Fitness” to its name as it saw sponsorship dollars for fitness overtake those for intramurals. Mr. Leopold anticipates that almost three-fourths of ACISF's business will be attached to fitness activities by 2016. “Most of our revenue growth will come from working with companies that target female consumers,” he says.

An app called REC*IT launched on 875 campuses nationwide in

September. It allows students to check schedules, track changes and register for activities via smartphone.

REC*IT also can track national participation in real time, company president David Oestreicher says. If a school is registering fewer soccer players than the national average, for instance, REC*IT can use its database and in-person consulting to help the school figure out if it needs to improve field conditions, lower registration fees or make other changes.

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