

Recreational Sports Journal

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Value of Recreational Sports on College Campuses

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Executive Summary

The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) study on the impact of participation in recreational sports programs and activities on college* campuses discovered several key relationships between participation and college and personal success factors. This study represents the most comprehensive attempt to investigate the impact of participation in recreational sports programs and activities on college satisfaction and performance. More than 2,600 students from sixteen (16) colleges participated in this study making it the largest, representative group of college students from multiple colleges ever studied with respect to the value of participation in recreational sports.

Other researchers have studied the value of recreational sports on college campuses. Most of these studies have focused on one specific college. Findings of these studies are summarized in the next section of this report.

College Satisfaction and Success

The NIRSA study found that participation in recreational sports programs and activities is correlated with overall college satisfaction and success. Participation in recreational sports is an important determinant of overall college satisfaction and success. While some determinants of satisfaction and success in college were more critical than recreational sports (such as academic courses, professors, job/graduate school prospects, housing and transportation), this study, nonetheless, reinforced what other limited research on this issue has found: namely that participation in recreational sports is a key determinant of satisfaction and success in college.

The NIRSA study showed convincingly that heavy users** of campus recreational sports programs and activities were happier than light users and nonusers. Further, the study showed that students who participated in recreational sports programs and activities identified recreational sports as one of the key determinants of college satisfaction and success. For example, recreational sports programs and activities was the fifth (out of 21 factors) most significant determinant of college satisfaction and success for heavy users. Among all students, recreational sports programs and activities ranked higher than internships, cultural activities, part-time or full-time work, student clubs and organizations, shopping, entertainment, restaurant options in the community, chance to study abroad, community service opportunities, watching varsity sports, participating in varsity sports, and sororities/fraternities as determinants of college satisfaction and success.

The importance of participation in recreational sports programs and activities was rather consistent across students' undergraduate experiences, yet it was slightly more important to freshmen and male students. There was not an appreciable drop in the importance of participation in recreational sports as a determinant

* The term "college" will be used throughout to refer to colleges and universities.

** For analysis purposes, students were grouped into three groups: (1) heavy users of recreational sports programs and activities- students who participated at least 25 times a month, (2) light users- students who participated up to 25 times per month, and (3) nonusers. Heavy users comprised 21% of the students, light users comprised 54% of the students, and nonusers represented 25% of students.

of college satisfaction and success even among graduate students. The value of participation in recreational sports held for students at public and private colleges and for students at small and large colleges although the value at small colleges was slightly less.

Heavy users of recreational sports programs and activities were similar to other students in the importance they placed in quality and range of courses, quality of professors, and graduate school/job prospects as determinants of college satisfaction and success. In other words, heavy participants in recreational sports were serious students concerned about the same academic standards and quality of education as other students. Heavy users simply were happier than other students and found recreational sports programs and activities to be more important in determining the overall value of their college experiences.

Students who participated heavily in college recreational sports programs and activities were more socially oriented than other students. For example, they placed more importance on sororities/fraternities, student clubs and organizations, meeting new and different people, and social activities. They were also more interested in watching or participating in varsity sports compared to other students. Finally, heavy users of recreational sports programs and activities rated diversity of the student population as a more important determinant of their college satisfaction and success than did other students.

Allocating College Resources

Students preferred that more college money be spent on professors, technology, libraries, housing and classrooms. Recreational sports programs and activities ranked below these aforementioned priorities, yet above campus organizations and clubs, campus landscaping and beautification, recruiting students, and varsity athletic programs. Among heavy users of recreational sports programs and activities (21% of the students) recreational sports programs and activities ranked third as a target for more funding. Only technology and professors were more critical targets for additional funding.

Identifying recreational sports programs and activities as a priority for funding did not vary considerably across class level, gender or race/ethnicity. Students at public and private colleges did not vary in their feelings about the priority of recreational sports as a target for more funding. Students at medium-sized colleges were more likely to identify recreational sports programs and activities as a priority for more funding.

Benefits of Participation

Students agreed that participating in recreational sports resulted in the following wide range of benefits (in priority order):

1. Improves emotional well-being
2. Reduces stress
3. Improves happiness
4. Improves self-confidence
5. Builds character
6. Makes students feel like part of the college community
7. Improves interaction with diverse sets of people
8. Is an important part of college social life
9. Teaches team-building skills
10. Is an important part of the learning experience
11. Aids in time management
12. Improves leadership skills

There was a direct correlation between the level of participation and the degree to which students received the benefits listed above. For example, heavy users of recreational sports were more likely to agree that participation improved their overall emotional well-being. This relationship was true for participation and

all benefits. Benefits of participation in recreational sports were greater to students during their first three years in college and dropped slightly during their senior year and graduate school. Benefits of recreational sports were equally strong for males and females and stronger for African Americans, Hispanics and whites, and somewhat lower among Asian students.

In general, students at public and private colleges had similar perceptions of the benefits of recreational sports. Students at public colleges were more likely to agree that participation increased their self-confidence, while students at private colleges were more likely to agree that participation helped them feel that they were part of the college community. Students at medium sized colleges were more likely than students at small or large colleges to perceive the value of participation in recreational sports.

Positive and Negative Behaviors

Participation in recreational sports programs and activities was directly correlated with positive behaviors such as community service, not smoking, attending religious services and heavier course loads (number of hours taken per term). However, participation in recreational sports programs and activities was also directly correlated to negative behaviors such as alcohol and illegal drug consumption, missing school or work and cheating in college. Other studies have shown that participants are more likely to be risk takers and are more socially oriented (also supported by NIRSA's study), and these characteristics are correlated with behaviors such as alcohol and illegal drug consumption.

There was no relationship between percentage of college expenses paid and participation in recreational sports programs and activities. SAT scores of participants were slightly higher than those of nonparticipants, yet there was no relationship between ACT scores and participation in recreational sports. Differences in grade point averages (GPAs) across heavy, light and nonuser groups were virtually nonexistent. Other studies have shown a positive correlation between participation and grades.