

## Participation in a Campus Recreation Program and its Effect on Student Retention

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The following qualitative research project was a case study review of the campus recreation program at the University of the Pacific. The study contains a brief literature review, participant observations, analysis of departmental participation rates, and in-depth interviews with University of the Pacific students. The study intended to understand the role of a campus recreation program in retaining students at the University of the Pacific. The type of research design, method, discussion, and measures of validity and reliability are incorporated in this paper. The method of analysis chosen was in-depth interviewing. Historical records, archival documents, and an analysis of the in-depth interviews were used to describe the case and analyze the findings.

**Key Words:** fitness, wellness, social integration, satisfaction, co-curricular involvement

For years researchers have examined why college students choose a college or university and remain there. Over the past 30 years, researchers and university administrators have realized that students often choose to remain at a college or university because of the extracurricular activities in which they become involved (Tinto, 1975). As research has evolved in this field, extracurricular activities identified by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1975) have been defined more specifically. Smith and Thomas (1989) studied social and co-curricular involvement by surveying recent alumni of other institutions. They found two variables: relationships with faculty and participation in intramurals. Both variables were better predictors of educational impact and success than were academic measures. Light (1990) found that more involvement in collegiate activities was strongly correlated with higher satisfaction of college life and academic success.

Wade (1991) concluded that an essential and critical component of retention and persistence of students was their sense of belonging to a community. Often students found that sense of belonging through their participation in recreation programs. In an interinstitutional national study, Bryant, Banta, and Bradley (1995) found that

30% of the students reported that campus recreational facilities and programs were key factors in their decision to either attend or continue at their institution. Belch, Gebel, and Mass (2001) used Arizona State University's recreation program to study the relationship between student recreation complex use, academic performance, and persistence of first time freshmen. They found that students who used the student recreation center not only persisted at a greater rate than those students who did not use the student recreation center, but they earned higher grade point averages and earned more credit hours at the end of their freshman year than non-users. They also stated that the interaction provided by recreational sports programs offered students the opportunity to develop informal support groups, find study partners, and seek advice from other students and faculty.

Research regarding campus recreation programs and their positive effect on student recruitment and retention has become more common since the 1970s (Astin, 1975). Administrators and professionals in the field of recreation need to further build on the research by assessing their own campus. Universities that want to compete for potential students and keep them may benefit from using recreation facilities and programs as focal points in the recruitment and retention process. Recreational professionals need to provide adequate rationales to college and university administrators showing the benefits that students gain from participation in a recreation program. Current data are one of the most important documented criteria to substantiate an increased operating budget, to justify adding personnel, and to validate the need for additional or new facilities.

## **The Campus Recreation Program Studied**

The campus recreation program at the institution upon which this study was based is an integral part of campus life, although it lacks a long history. Records and participation documents only date back to 1997. Before 1992, there were no fitness and wellness centers on the campus. The only recreational outlet for students was through the intramural program. The department began to grow significantly in 2000. This growth was due to several factors. The first was that the department was re-organized and became the Department of Campus Recreation. The second is that it was placed within the Division of Student Life and reports to the Vice President of Student Life, where previously it had reported to both the offices of intercollegiate athletics and student activities. Third, the student fee had been increased in 2000 and allocated to operations of the campus recreation program. Finally, staffing levels were increased in the campus recreation area as well. The current staff includes four full time professional staff members, and three graduate assistants. By contrast, in 2000, there were only two professional staff members and one graduate assistant. Today, the Department of Campus Recreation encompasses a comprehensive array of programs and facilities.

It is important to note that more students participate in the campus recreation program than any other Student Life Program at the institution studied. As of May 2005, 78% of the student body participated in at least one component of the campus recreation program compared with 38% in 2000. The Department of Campus Recreation at the university studied has undergone major changes in the past five years and continues to be one of the most rapidly growing and changing departments on the campus.

## Methods

### Research Site

The campus recreation program studied was housed at a small, private liberal arts university located on the West Coast. Interviews occurred on campus, in the office of the Director of Campus Recreation, during the months of March, July, and August. Although the campus has satellite recreation facilities, the interviews took place in the main gym, home to the director of recreation and intramural office.

This research was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Things are studied in their natural settings. The researcher attempts to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. In short, the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, and reports detailed views of informants (Creswell, 1998).

### Participants

Eight students were purposely sampled for this study. Participants were four men and four women. All participants were chosen due to their involvement in the campus recreation program. Each participant agreed to be interviewed for this study.

### Data Collection Procedures

The interview method of collecting data was used. Seven questions were drafted and asked of each interviewee. These seven questions were derived from the original research question: "Is participation in Campus Recreation related to retention of Pacific's students?"

The following seven questions were asked of each person interviewed:

1. Describe those activities you participated in growing up.
2. What do you do to stay in shape?
3. Do you consider recreation a social activity?
4. What role, if any, has recreation played in continuing your education here at the University of the Pacific?
5. Why do you participate in recreational activities?
6. What recreational facilities do you use on campus? Why?
7. What has your use of recreational facilities or participation in recreation programs allowed you to do on campus?

### Data Analysis

Notes were taken during interviews and at times students were asked to clarify or further describe their answers. Interviews were recorded and used for further clarification. The tapes were transcribed and read several times. Key phrases or words in the transcription were underlined or circled. Comments determined to be similar were highlighted, categorized, and compared with one another. Verbatim

quotes were noted and underlined. Re-interviewing was conducted for clarification which helped ensure that proper themes and pattern development were identified, adding validity to the interpretation of the data. Open coding and axial coding was completed after these transcripts were analyzed. Open coding involves categorization of phenomenon where each category represents a unit of information. Axial coding occurs after open coding and the categories identified from open coding are then brought together and presented in a logic diagram where a “central phenomenon” was identified from the original set of categories. Common themes drove the identification of the central phenomenon.

## **The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher was the director of campus recreation. The statistics and records referenced throughout the study were collected and reported by the researcher.

## **Key Issues**

To help bring clarity and order to the issues, categories, patterns, and themes being revealed all were put in figure form. The figures included simple open coding, axial coding, and a circular spiral showed the relationship between the major themes. The circular spiral shows how all the themes are connected. Codes from the interviews included: physical activeness, diversity, socialization, meeting new people, friendship, sense of community, faculty relationships, student relationships, small campus, background/lifestyle, competition, academic/major, fun and self esteem.

## **Reliability and Validity**

Triangulation, data triangulation, participant feedback, and verbatim quotes were used to establish reliability and validity. Verbatim quotes and paraphrasing were used to further reduce codes to themes.

# **Results**

## **Axial Coding**

In the axial coding stage a central phenomenon seemed to emerge: “Sense of community at the university.” This theme reoccurred through verbatim quotes and other phrases from the interviewees. After reviewing the data and interviews, codes were narrowed down into categories (themes). The general themes developed were: friendship, socialization, and physically active. The central phenomenon again was a sense of community at the university. Recreation participation had a direct relationship with developing a sense of community. The codes of friendship, meeting new people, relationships forged, and socialization were intertwined. Those experiences were a direct result of participating in the recreation program and in turn helped the student develop the sense of community identified in interviews. For instance, being physically active led these students to participate in the recreation program. This allowed them to meet new people, socialize, develop friendships,

and be exposed to a diverse group of people. The university studied was a small campus and the experiences cited had given students a sense of community, which is one reason why students felt a connection to the institution, and in part, why they chose to continue their education at the university.

Meeting new people, student relationships, and relationships forged were linked to the theme of friendship. Participating in the recreational program allowed these students to make friends. These codes also extended into the theme of socialization. All students were physically active because they participated in the recreation program. Add small campus, relationships with faculty, academic/major, and diversity, and a sense of community emerged as a central phenomenon.

When the students were asked "What role, if any, has your participation in the campus recreation program played in continuing your education at the university?" it appeared to surprise them. This question was most directly related to the original research questions. Three interviewees indicated their participation did have some impact on their decision to continue at the university. These students indicated that they persisted in part due to their involvement in campus recreation activities. Participation in the program allowed them to develop friendships and feel part of a larger community. Although a small sample, it was apparent that participation in the university's campus recreation program helped these students develop a social life, develop friendships, and define the university as a community. Participating in a recreation program exposed these students to different experiences, allowing them to develop perceptions, which led to their feelings of community at the university. This was a factor in their decision to continue at the university.

Smith and Thomas (1989) found that relationships with faculty and participation in intramurals were better predictors of educational impact and success than academic measures. Additionally, Light (1990) found that more involvement in co-curricular collegiate activities correlated with higher satisfaction of college life and academic success. These themes were identified by the participants in this study.

Even more revealing was a study by Wade (1991) in which he concluded that an essential and critical component of retention and persistence of students was their feeling of belonging to a community. It was evident that a sense of belonging or a feeling of a sense of community was important to the students interviewed in this study, hence the sense of community at the university studied in this research was the central phenomenon that emerged.

## Conclusion

Even though the researcher found central themes regarding the impact of a campus recreation program on retention and sense of community, there are still limitations that need to be noted. Since the researcher was the primary administrator of the program, there was potential for researcher bias. The findings of this study were based on a case study with a small sample size so it is important to be cautious when generalizing research results.

Future research in which universities combine and share data from qualitative and quantitative studies such as this would benefit the profession of campus recreation. Qualitative studies can and should pose interview questions which are intended to garner information regarding the constructs of recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and benefits of participating in a campus recreation program.

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