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# A Survey of Campus Recreation Directors at NIRSA Institutions: Activities Emphasized, Student Participation Patterns, Trends and Future Offerings Contemplated

William F. Stier

*The College at Brockport*, [bstier@brockport.edu](mailto:bstier@brockport.edu)

Robert C. Schneider

*The College at Brockport*, [rschneid@brockport.edu](mailto:rschneid@brockport.edu)

Stephen Kampf

*Bowling Green State University - Main Campus*, [skampf@bgsu.edu](mailto:skampf@bgsu.edu)

Scott G. Haines

*The College at Brockport*, [shaines@brockport.edu](mailto:shaines@brockport.edu)

Gregory E. Wilding

*University at Buffalo*, [gwilding@buffalo.edu](mailto:gwilding@buffalo.edu)

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# A Survey of Campus Recreation Directors at NIRSA Institutions: Activities Emphasized, Student Participation Patterns, Trends and Future Offerings Contemplated

By Dr. William F. Stier, Jr., Dr. Robert C. Schneider, Steve Kampf, Scott Haines, and Dr. Gregory E. Wilding

*A survey, using an instrument constructed expressly for this investigation, was conducted of directors of campus recreation at all 682 NIRSA colleges and universities in the United States and Canada to determine the current status of: (a) the degree of emphasis institutions currently place on nine categories of sports and recreational activities, (b) the percentage of students, undergraduate and graduate, actually participating in each of these nine categories of activities, (c) future recreational activities and programs, not currently offered to students, but being considered for inclusion within the next 12 months, and (d) future trends in terms of problems (challenges and opportunities) facing college campus recreation departments. Two hundred and sixty-nine schools returned usable surveys for a 39% rate of return. This investigation provides a snapshot of specific current practices and programming offerings of campus Recreation Directors, as well as their opinions in terms of future programming plans and anticipated trends affecting their campus recreation departments. The data were analyzed in light of the locations of the responding institutions within the six regions of NIRSA, the size of the institutions and whether the schools were classified as public or private. The nine categories of recreational activities included: (a) intramurals, (b) club sports, (c) open recreation, (d) outdoor recreation, (e) group exercise/aerobics, (f) aquatics, (g) instructional programming, (h) special events, and (i) youth and family activities.*

Over the years there has been a significant amount of anecdotal information appearing in the popular, as well as in the professional, literature that addressed the status of different aspects of campus recreational activities and programs. Four such topics have included:

1. The growth of campus recreational activities and programs
2. The amount of participation by students
3. The positive aspects (benefits and advantages) of student participation in college recreational sports (both competitive and noncompetitive activities)
4. Future trends

Both the growth in, and increased emphasis on, college recreational sports activities and programs have continued at a high rate during the recent years. Schriberg and Rester (1994, p. 26) stated: "...colleges and universities throughout the country saw significant improvements in intramural and recreation programs." While there has been growth, both in the number and type of activities, the number of some classifications of participants, as well as the percentages of some participants, this increase has not been reported across the board among all student constituencies. Witness the study by Barcelona and Ross (2002) who reported in their study of participation patterns in campus recreational sports that the rates of involvement for women, older students and students who live off campus have not risen significantly. In fact, the participation pattern for such students, in terms of a national pattern, has remained "relatively unchanged throughout the years under investigation" (p. 51). Even among the general population there has been this disparate pattern of participation (Robinson, 1988; Harvey and Singleton, 1989).

Additionally, an earlier study by Stier, Quarterman and Stier (1993) of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) indicated that although 96% of the respondents (directors) felt their institutions had an active intramural sports programs for all students, in reality, the percentage of females participating at their schools fell far short of male students (who took an active part in such activities). In that study, 34% of the colleges had a male participation rate at the 50% rate or higher.

However, for women, only 13% of the colleges had a participation rate at 50% or greater.

## **Background Information**

### ***Programming—Activities Offered***

Offerings by campus recreation departments are varied and broad in nature. Numerous authors have provided a number of categories or classifications under which campus recreational activities are provided (Bulfin, 1996; Leslie, Sparling & Owen, 2001; Tsiotsou, 1998):

- Family activities
- Fitness/wellness activities
- Instructional sports and activities (group exercises, aerobics, aquatics)
- Intramurals
- Open or informal recreation
- Outdoor recreation
- Sports clubs

### ***Benefits of Participation***

Students gain much through their involvement in recreational activities sponsored and/or overseen by their institution's department or office of campus recreation (or whatever nomenclature may be used on an individual campus). The school's facility designated as the focus of campus recreation (Student Recreation Complex—SRC) frequently becomes the focal point for campus life and can become the center of the so-called campus community (Dalgarn, 2001).

Hesel (2000) stated that a related benefit to the college may be seen in the fact that a significant number of potential students consider the availability of a quality campus recreational sports program as a very important factor in making the final decision for their college of choice. Hesel (2000, p. 2) states: "... opportunities to participate in intramural and recreational sports are of significantly greater importance to prospective college students than are top-ranked national teams or big-time athletic programs in major sports."

The impact of a quality campus recreation program is not limited to the years in which students are enrolled at their college or university but extends beyond the college years throughout the individual's life in terms of their choice of physical activities as an adult (Broughton and Griffin, 1994). Developing skills in sports and physical activities can lead to a pattern or habit of participation, which in turn, facilitates continued and expanded involvement (lifetime activities) in such efforts throughout one's later years (Farrell and Thompson, 1999). Increased skill level, coupled with self-satisfaction and enjoyment are all motivational factors in continuing and even increasing the frequency and scope of one's involvement in sports participation and physical activity (Cheng, Stier, Kim, Koshimizu, and Koozechian, 2002).

Another benefit includes the effect that such participation may have on students' general well-being in terms of mental and physical health, physical conditioning and the general quality of life (Kanter, 1997; Theodore, 1999). Miller, Bullock, Clements and Basi (2000, p. 19-30) revealed that participants reported that the primary reason they become involved in campus recreation activities was to remain (or get into) in shape. And, the most commonly reported justification (by students) for failure to use campus recreation facilities or become involved in recreational activities was lack of time. Ellis, Compton, Tyson and Bohlig (2002, p. 58) confirmed in their study that: "...more frequent participants tend to have more positive health and quality of life."

A benefit can also be seen in the success in college itself that student participants in recreational activities/sports activities report that they experience. And, yet another related benefit of such participation is the high satisfaction level with students' overall college experience and their higher retention rates.

In a study involving 11,076 college freshmen, at a large, public university located in the southwest, it was found that in terms of participation patterns, freshmen who utilized the Student Recreation Complex (SRC) persisted as enrolled students in the institution at a greater rate at the end of the first and second semesters than those who did not participate. These students also earned "slightly higher GPAs and earned more credit

hours at the end of the first year” (Belch, Gebel & Maas (2001, p. 261). Of special note is the fact that nonusers entered as college freshmen with higher GPAs as well as higher ACT/SAT scores than those freshmen who entered and utilized the SRC.

A national study conducted by Downs (2003) revealed that participation in recreational activities, including sports, related positively with overall satisfaction and success in the college in which the students were enrolled. This study by Downs revealed that recreational activities on the college scene have many potential advantages. One major advantage of such programs centered around the fact that college students who are active (greater frequency, i.e., heavy users) participants in college recreational and competitive sports programs, are self-reported to be more happy and satisfied with their college experience and were more likely to encounter success in their college experience than those students who were nonusers or who were light users (p. 9). Downs also indicated that the benefits of recreational participation were greater for those students regardless of whether they were enrolled at public or private institutions of higher education. However, for those students who were enrolled in smaller colleges, the benefits were reported slightly less than their counterparts who were enrolled in large institutions.

A summary of possible benefits accruing to collegiate participants in campus recreational sports activities can include, but not be limited to: (Stier, 2000, p. 87)

- Improves physical fitness and overall health/quality of life
- Aids in mental health and psychological well being
- Assists in development of social skills
- Provides opportunities for (social) meaningful interaction with others
- Assists in dealing with stress
- Creates opportunities for leadership and “followship”
- Helps to build character, self-confidence and a positive self concept
- Provides opportunities for achievement, for success

- Facilitates time management and the setting of priorities
- Enables one to deal with and meet challenges, problems and difficulties
- Potentially improves the (academic) success level of the college experience
- Increases retention rate of the college participants
- Prepares for future life situations and circumstances

### ***Trends in Campus Recreation:***

A study to investigate the trends for recreational sports in the 21st century was conducted in 2000 by Young and Ross. Utilizing the Delphi technique, the researchers were able to identify a total of 31 trends with the assistance of 33 experts.

The top five trends:

1. **Finances:** securing sufficient income to meet budgetary needs
2. **Technology:** providing services online
3. **Finances:** for new construction of needed facilities
4. **Technology:** the ability to communicate with the public and constituencies
5. **Programming:** for fitness/wellness due to greater need expressed by consumers

Of the top five trends, the issue of finances (money) was involved in No. 1 and No. 3, while technology was part of No. 2 and No. 4. The number one trend identified had to do with finances, specifically, the challenge of securing sufficient income to meet budgetary needs. Providing services online (technology) was the number two trend. The third trend also involved finances, that is, money for new construction of needed facilities. The use of technology to communicate with the public and constituencies was ranked fourth, while the fifth trend revolved around programming needs pertaining to fitness and wellness due to greater need expressed by consumers.

The fact that this fifth trend might have already been upon us for over a decade and will continue to be with us for the foreseeable future is supported by the following three studies. At The Ohio State University, a 1996 poll revealed that almost 90% of the undergraduate students felt that recreational sports and fitness activity were important to them (Haines, 2001).

Another study dealing specifically with fitness/wellness trends was conducted by McAlpine, Kreger and Pfingsten (1995). These researchers utilized the 1992-1993 NIRSA Fitness Survey in their own national study of selected NIRSA institutions and found that approximately two-thirds of the schools polled were offering wellness/health promotion programs to their students. Of these schools, most began such programs after 1990.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

This current study of NIRSA institutions in North America was undertaken in an effort to determine answers to important questions that might be helpful to those individuals working on the firing line of the recreational sports profession, i.e., Directors of campus recreation on the collegiate level. There were no additional published studies found in the professional literature that specifically addressed the four issues that formed the essence of this investigation. Barcelona and Ross (2002, p. 41) declared that: "One of the issues facing campus recreational sports is a lack of theoretical and empirical research in almost all facets of the field." Nesbitt earlier echoed this same thought in 1993 by imploring that research be increased so as to secure much needed data dealing with the "effect of recreational sports programs on student participants' total university experience" (p. 18).

The purpose of this study was to determine the current status of recreational programs at American and Canadian colleges and universities holding membership within NIRSA—through the use of a survey expressly designed for this investigation. Specifically directors of campus recreation were surveyed to obtain data in four major areas:



1. The degree of emphasis placed by campus recreation departments in terms of nine different categories of sports and recreational activities
2. The percentage of each institution's students who participate in one or more of these categories of recreational activities
3. The future programs or activities (not now being offered) that the respondents would anticipate making available to the student constituencies within the next 12 months
4. The major trends facing campus recreation, as viewed by the Directors of campus recreation

### **Method of the Investigation**

A survey instrument was devised following a review of the current literature and consultation with professionals and practitioners in the recreation field. Additionally, selected experts within the field of college recreation, as part of a pilot study, evaluated the completed survey instrument for its suitability, readability and content validity for this investigation. As a result, the survey was further adapted and revised in line with the recommendations of this panel of experts.

The revised survey was mailed to 682 directors of campus recreation at NIRSA schools within the United States and Canada. A total of 269 useable surveys were returned for a 39.4% rate of return. Seventy percent of the responding institutions were private, while the remaining 30% were classified as public institutions of higher education.

### **The Findings of the Study**

In terms of the locations of the institutions, the respondents categorized themselves as:

- Rural: 28%
- Urban: 44%
- Suburban: 28%

The size of the institutions ranged from a low of 900 students to a high of 46,000 students. The mean student population of all schools that

**Table 1: The degree of emphasis placed on categories of recreational activities by departments of campus recreation at NIRSA colleges and universities—compared with the percentage of students actually participating**

	Strongly Emphasized	Moderately Emphasized	Slightly Emphasized	Not Emphasized	Percentage Students Participating - All Schools
Intramurals	65%	29%	6%	—	37%
Club Sports	19%	36%	22%	23%	10%
Open Recreation	47%	35%	13%	5%	46%
Outdoor Recreation	16%	24%	31%	29%	10%
Group Exercise/Aerobics	43%	35%	13%	9%	18%
Aquatics	13%	34%	32%	21%	10%
Instructional Programming	14%	27%	30%	29%	12%
Special Events	12%	44%	33%	11%	15%
Youth and Family	3%	15%	27%	55%	4%

returned useable surveys was 11,563. For the purpose of this study, the responding institutions were arbitrarily classified as small (5,000 and less; 33%), medium (5,001 to 15,000; 38%), and large (more than 15,000; 29%). All of the six NIRSA regions were represented in this study. The percentages of institutions that responded to this survey, broken down by their locations within the six NIRSA regions, include:

- Region I: 23%
- Region II: 23%
- Region III: 14%
- Region IV: 17%
- Region V: 7%
- Region VI: 16%

### ***Degree of Emphasis Placed on Recreational Activities (Categories)***

The Directors of campus recreation were asked to identify the degree of emphasis placed by their own campus recreation departments in terms of the nine specified categories of recreational activities, (see Table 1). This table also has the percentage of student participation provided by the respondents.

**Intramurals** were strongly emphasized by the largest percentage of institutions with some 65% of those responding. In contrast, youth and family activities were not emphasized at all in 55% of the schools, the highest category for not being emphasized.

The matter of being **public or private** evidently had an impact upon the degree of emphasis placed upon open recreation and group exercise/aerobics. Fifty-three percent of public institutions strongly emphasized open recreation, while only 32% of the private institutions did the same.

In the area of **group exercise/aerobics**, 49% of the public institutions strongly emphasized this recreational category in contrast to 30% of schools in the private category. Also, public institutions (16%) were three times more likely to strongly emphasize aquatics than were private institutions (5%) of higher education.

In terms of **size of institutions**, the greatest percentage differences were between large and small institutions. Club sports were strongly emphasized by a larger percentage of large institutions (30%) than smaller schools (10%). In fact, club sports were not emphasized at all in 37% of small schools.

**Open recreation** was strongly emphasized by 65% of large institutions but by only 29% of small schools. Another distinction was noted in the area of group exercise/aerobics where 69% of the large schools surveyed strongly emphasized such activities as opposed to 17% of the small institutions.

With respect to the category of **family and youth** activities, 69% of small schools did not emphasize such activities at all compared to 35% of the large schools.

In terms of **regional disparate findings** among school emphasis of activities, the greatest differences were in reference to club sports, aquatics

**In terms of future activities being contemplated by various departments of campus recreation, more schools are contemplating the addition of fitness/wellness type activities or programs (ranked No. 1) for their students than any other type of activity**

**Table 2: Percentage of students participating in various recreational activities — all NIRSA colleges and according to the size of institutions**

	Percentage of Students Participating — All Schools	Large Inst.	Medium Inst.	Small Inst.	Public Schools	Private Schools
Intramurals	37%	30%	36%	44%	33%	47%
Club Sports	10%	9%	10%	12%	9%	12%
Open Recreation	46%	53%	44%	42%	45%	47%
Outdoor Recreation	10%	10%	10%	9%	9%	11%
Group Exercise/Aerobics	18%	22%	18%	14%	18%	17%
Aquatics	10%	14%	10%	9%	11%	9%
Instructional Programming	12%	15%	13%	9%	11%	14%
Special Events	15%	12%	16%	17%	14%	16%
Youth and Family	4%	6%	4%	3%	5%	3%

and special events. Region IV was the region that had the lowest percentage (5%) of its schools strongly emphasizing club sports. The next lowest percentage was 21% representing both Regions II and VI. Region IV also had aquatics as being strongly emphasized by only 5% of its schools as compared to the next lowest percentage of schools in Region II (11%) and in Region I (12%).

### *Percentage of Student Participation*

**Table 2** provides a complete breakdown of student participation for each of the nine categories of recreational activities according to public/private institutions, as well as by size (large, medium and small). Respondents indicated that open recreation was the activity opportunity with the highest percentage of student participation among the largest number of the institutions surveyed (46%). Intramurals was second (37%) while group exercise/aerobics ranked a third with 18%. Other than large institutions having a 22% participation rate versus small schools with a 14% participation rate in group exercise/aerobics, there were no appreciable percentage differences in terms of the nine categories of recreational activities when viewed from the perspective of being public/private, in light of the size of the responding schools (large; medium; small), or in terms of the region in which the institutions were located.

**Table 3: Future recreation programs being contemplated for inclusion within the campus recreation offerings within the near future (within 12 months)**

<b>CLASSIFICATION OF ACTIVITIES</b>				
Fitness/ Wellness: 26% of Schools	Outdoor Rec: 17% of Schools	Intramurals: 17% of Schools	Instructional: 10.7% of Schools	Club Sports: 7.8% of Schools
Personal Training	Climbing Walls	Bowling	Swimming	Figure Skating
Body Assessment	Outdoor Pursuits	Disc Golf	Martial Arts	Soccer
Satellite Locations	Outdoor Fitness Trails	Faculty/Staff Participation	Lifeguard Certification	Crew
Spinning	High Ropes	Inner Tube Water Polo	Scuba Diving	Women's Football
Pilates	Kayak Rentals	Ultimate Frisbee		Gymnastics
Water Aerobics	Ski Trips	Badminton		Figure Skating
Yoga	Backpacking	Floor Hockey		Ice Hockey
Faculty/Staff Fitness Programs	Paintball	Golf Tournament		
Free Weights	White Water Rafting	Ice Hockey		
Group Exercise/ Aerobics		Water Basketball		
Indoor Jogging		Kickball		
Massage Therapy				

### ***Future Recreation Programs/Activities being contemplated***

**Table 3** presents those programs or activities not currently offered at institutions, but which the Directors of campus recreation are contemplating making available to the students within the next 12 months. The activities or programs are classified into five categories. The largest category of activities being considered involved **fitness and wellness** with 26% of the responding institutions indicating that they are assessing whether to introduce such programs in the immediate future (12 months).

The next two categories tie with 17% of the institutions thinking about

**Table 4: Future trends (Problems and Opportunities) for college campus recreation programs as viewed by campus recreation directors for their own programs**

<b>FUTURE TRENDS/PROBLEMS/CHALLENGES</b>			
Fitness/Wellness: 36% of Schools	Budget/Revenue: 30% of Schools	Facilities: 20% of Schools	Outdoor Recreation: 17% of Schools
Lack of Exercise by US Populace	Budget Cuts	Loss of Space	Demonstrated Need for Adventure Activities
Changes in Types of Group Fitness Classes	Doing More with Less	Need for New and Bigger Facilities	Increased Growth in Adventure Activities on Campus
Increased Demand of Technology in Exercise Equipment	Allocation of Funds	Shift from Union Building to Recreation Facility for Student Gatherings	Greater Interest in Adventure-Type Activities by Students
Dramatic Increase in Need for Fitness Space	Financial Hard Times	Dedicated Facility for Campus Recreation	Leadership Training via Outdoor Experiences
Inadequate Fitness Facilities	Resources being Outsourced	Scheduling Problems	
Downward Trend in Fitness Craze	Major Changes in Funding and Budgets	Remodeling Older Facilities	
	Increasing Membership		
	Self-Generating Funds		
	Corporate Funding		
	Becoming Financially Independent		
	Increased Fundraising		
	Determining Who to Charge and Who to Provide Free Services		
	Creating Business Model/ Atmosphere		
	Entrepreneurship		

instituting outdoor recreation type activities and specific intramurals activities. Instructional activities and programs are third with 10.7% of the institutions thinking about offering such activities as: swimming, martial arts, lifeguard certification, and scuba diving, among others. Finally, **club sports**, such as: figure skating, soccer, crew, women's football, gymnastics, and ice hockey, are being considered for inclusion in the campus recreation program in the near future in 7.8% of the schools surveyed.

### *Future Trends (Problems and Challenges)*

The campus recreation Directors responding to the survey identified a variety of future trends (potential problems and opportunities) for their own college recreation programs. Their responses were classified into four distinct categories in **Table 4**. The top category, selected by 36% of the respondents, was the area of **fitness and wellness**. The second most recognized area of trends (future challenges and difficulties) centered around **finances and budgets** with 30% of the campus directors indicating that the future for their campus recreation programs involved problems and opportunities related to or associated with money and resources (absence thereof). The third category involved facilities used by campus recreation for programming (20%). Such trends involved both the need for better usage of facilities and the need for securing or building more facilities that would be appropriate for campus recreation usage. The last category dealt with the general area of outdoor recreation (17%).

### **Discussion**

**Intramurals** (65%) and **open recreational opportunities** (47%) were the most strongly emphasized activities among the schools surveyed. Similarly, these two categories of campus recreational activities were also the most frequently patronized by college students, 37% and 46% respectively. Whether this similarity in percentage is the result of institutions meeting the needs of their students, or the result of the effectiveness of the institutions' marketing and publicity efforts or other factors (degree of emphasis) — could not be determined from this study.

**Group exercise/aerobics**, although ranked third (43%) among all institutions in terms of being strongly emphasized by the various departments of campus recreation among the responding schools, generated only an 18% percentage participation rate among students at the schools surveyed.

**The fourth category of activities (instructional) being considered for addition, the three most frequently mentioned type of classes all involve aquatic facilities (swimming, lifeguard certification and scuba diving).**

There must be both facilities available for the type of recreational activities and participation opportunities (time set aside, etc.) in order for the student participation rates to be significant. Witness the area of aquatics, with the need for a specialized facility. The survey revealed that an average of 10% of the student populations, among all respondents, participated in some type of aquatics type recreational or com-

petitive activities sponsored by campus recreation. This low participation might be due to a lack of suitable facilities, a lack of promotion or emphasis for these activities or from a lack of interest or desire by students.

There were no discernable relationships between institutions and the degree of emphasis their departments of campus recreation placed on different programming offerings in terms of their location (NIRSA regions). Similarly, there were no meaningful or discernable differences based on the size of the institutions.

In terms of future activities being contemplated by various departments of campus recreation, more schools are contemplating the addition of fitness/wellness type activities or programs (ranked No. 1) for their students than any other type of activity.

Outdoor recreational programs and intramural activities tied as the next highest category (ranked No. 2) of offerings being considered as additions to the campus recreation programming.

It is interesting to note that in the fourth category of activities (instructional) being considered for addition, the three most frequently



mentioned type of classes all involve aquatic facilities (swimming, lifeguard certification and scuba diving).

In terms of future trends, and the potential problems and opportunities they represent to schools, Directors of campus recreation ranked fitness/wellness activities as the No. 1 trend and the matter of money/finances as the number two trend affecting their efforts to make adequate and quality programming possible. The third ranked trend involves facilities (availability, being able to secure suitable facilities) while the fourth ranked trend involves the area of outdoor recreation. All trends reflect the necessity to meet the increasing needs of the numerous and varied constituencies of the department of campus recreation.

This last trend corresponds to the fact that outdoor recreation was the second ranked category in terms of activities being considered for inclusion within those institutions wishing to either expand or initiate new programs or activities on their campuses.

**Outdoor recreational programs and intramural activities tied as the next highest category (ranked No. 2) of offerings being considered as additions to the campus recreation programming.**

### **Recommendations**

Future research might be conducted to determine the relationship, if any, between student participation patterns in specific recreational and sports activities and the availability of facilities necessary to support such participation or involvement. Similarly, further study might be conducted to determine the cause and effect relationship and the effectiveness between the marketing and promotional efforts (emphasis placed by) of campus recreation departments and the resulting participation patterns (rates) of students at NIRSA colleges and universities.

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