

Required Physical Activity in Schools - A Good Idea?

By Penny McCullagh, Ph.D., KT Editor

Requiring physical activity for college students? An interesting question indeed. What about requiring it in elementary and high schools? It is pretty well known that physical activity is good for you. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find evidence to the contrary.

But if we know physical activity is beneficial, would it not be beneficial to include it in our school curriculum like other subjects such as math, science, history, and language arts? The answer is apparently NOT! According to data amassed by SHAPE (Society of Health and Physical Educators) (<https://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/son/upload/shape-of-the-nation-infographic1.pdf>) 74 % of states require students to take physical education from elementary through high school BUT:

- 28 states allow waivers
- Only 22 states allot a specific time requirement
- Only 10 states designate specific funding for professional development for physical education
- Only 6 states require physical education in every grade

- Only 3 states meet the recommended time to meet national standards

The data for encouraging physical activity participation in colleges is no better. Despite calls by national organizations such as SHAPE America, the National Physical Activity Plan, and ACSM's Exercise is Medicine on Campus campaign, fewer than 40% of colleges in the USA require students to take any type of physical activity as a graduation requirement and this is less than in earlier years (Cardinal, Sorensen, & Cardinal, 2012).

Within the psychological literature it is well known that individuals who have free choice are more intrinsically motivated. Thus it could be that requiring students to take physical activity classes as a requirement might decrease intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, it might be that exposing students to new activities may provide a challenge that could change their perceptions and motivation in the future to engage in activity.

In an attempt to provide some data on this issue, Kim and Cardinal (2018) measured motivation (amotivation, extrinsic regulation, and intrinsic motivation), physical activity competence and participation levels, and how a policy regarding physical activity affects

motivation and behavior in undergraduate students. A total of 953 students from two universities participated in the study. One university had a required physical activity requirement and the other university did not.

The authors did recognize some limitations in their study, but nonetheless, showed that students who were required to take physical activity classes were less motivated to be active but as they moved through their college years from freshman to senior they became more motivated. If the activity classes are elective, they tend to draw on students who are already motivated.

They did suggest that having physical activity as a requirement allows access by all individuals and thus exposes everyone to the benefits of physical activity.

I wanted to follow up with the authors of the Kim and Cardinal paper and was able to communicate with Brad Cardinal. I asked him a few questions and he provided responses.

Tell us about the physical activity program at your university. Are classes required or elective? If required did you personally work on classes achieving this status and do you have any advice to others who are trying to do so?

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Oregon State University has a three credit hour graduation requirement in the area of “Fitness” that the students must take. To fulfill the requirement the students take a two hour lecture class (i.e., Lifetime Fitness for Health; HHS 231) where they learn behavioral strategies, and they also take one physical activity class (of their own choosing) where they can apply the knowledge and skills that have been learned. This is part of the university’s general education curriculum, which is called the Baccalaureate Core (Bacc Core) at Oregon State University. The overarching aim of the requirement is to provide essential skills and strategies aimed at promoting lifelong health and wellness, which is one of the key signature research areas of the university.

Oregon State had a physical education requirement long before I arrived. It evolved over the years, and it continues to evolve to this day. During my time at Oregon State, I have worked in various ways to help maintain and strengthen the requirement. This includes serving on the Bacc Core Committee, ad-hoc committees that have looked at revising/revamping the Bacc Core, conducting research on and about the requirement, contributing to reports about the requirement, and serving as a Faculty Senator and speaking in favor of retaining the requirement. All of this has proven very helpful.

Furthermore, one of Oregon State’s three “Signature Areas of Distinction” is “Improving Human Health and Wellness.” There is a compelling link between the requirement and this signature area of distinction.

We have a dedicated cadre of committed and talented people at the university that work hard to maintain the quality and reputation of the requirement. None of this happened by accident. It has been very intentional.

What do you see as a major roadblock as to why universities do not require physical activity?

Required courses of various types have been challenged, but perhaps none so much as those in physical activity education and health. Over the years our field has acquired a substantial amount of data showing the value of the courses. Yet, the challenges continue. Some even come from within our own academic units! (I discussed this in a fairly recent *Quest* article cited below.)

Some unique secular changes are occurring that also are creating challenges, including posh campus recreation centers and a shifting emphasis toward career education. Demonstrating how the requirement uniquely helps the institution fulfill its mission is paramount, as is demonstrating

how it helps prepare students for life. The more connected the program and associated requirement is, the better. For example, among other things, our requirement is seen as contributing to first-year retention rates/student success, international student inclusion and success, and interdisciplinary studies (e.g., swimming and SCUBA classes contribute to our oceanography program). Quality instruction, well-kept and modern equipment and facilities, and strong leadership that truly “gets it” is most helpful.

Any other comments.

Our recent study demonstrated the value of the requirement in terms of reach. Having the requirement reaches everyone, whereas in the elective format it simply does not. The required approach is akin to a public health approach where everybody can obtain the benefits.

Cardinal, B.J. (2017) Quality College and University Instructional Physical Activity Programs Contribute to Mens Sana in Corpore Sano, “The Good Life,” and Healthy Societies, *Quest*, 69:4, 531-541 DOI: 10.1080/00336297.2017.1320295

Cardinal, B. J., Sorensen, S. D., & Cardinal, M. K. (2012). Historical perspective and current status of the physical education graduation requirement at American 4-Year colleges and universities. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 83, 503-512. DOI: 10.1080/02701367.2012.10599139

Kim, M. S., & Cardinal, B. J. (2018). Differences in university students’ motivation between a required and an elective physical activity education policy. *Journal of American College Health*, DOI: 10.1089/07448481.2018.1469501