



A photograph of an outdoor fitness park. In the foreground, there is a piece of exercise equipment with blue and yellow frames and yellow foot pedals, mounted on a black rubber mat. The background shows a lush green lawn, several trees with dense foliage, and a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

THE OUTDOOR FITNESS PARK

A CREATIVE CAMPUS TOOL FOR HEALTHIER STUDENTS

BY ANNE-MARIE SPENCER

Many people, especially college students, live with the stress of fast-paced lifestyles. Too often, exercise time gets cut out to make room for all of the other areas of their lives they need to manage. Given this situation, when campus improvements help students more easily make time for fitness, then wonderful things can happen for students.



Physical activity is vital for maintaining overall fitness, which includes maintaining a healthy weight, caring for bones, muscles and joints, promoting physiological wellbeing, and strengthening the immune system. As the incidence of obesity grows, so does the increased risk of hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, sleep apnea, respiratory problems, and certain cancers. These health-related risks are not the only challenges faced by increasingly sedentary behaviors. Skill-related risks, like loss of agility, balance, and power can also have a detrimental effect on the overall quality of life.

Removing Impediments to Student Exercise

People have a variety of reasons for avoiding exercise. Common reasons provided are that they don't have enough time, they think

exercise is boring, or they don't know how to begin an exercise regime or how to perform exercises. Luckily, a movement toward outdoor gyms is helping people address these concerns.

Outdoor gyms consist of between five to fifteen pieces of equipment positioned in a cluster or along a trail. Because they are in public spaces, they are open anytime the common area is open, and most feature instruction signage or QR codes near each piece of equipment to provide instruction to beginners. In addition, while it is widely accepted that being outdoors is good for people, there are many additional benefits associated with outdoor exercise, including improved wellbeing and physiological health. Additionally, there is emerging evidence of psychological and social benefits. Just as importantly, evidence shows that people who exercise outdoors tend to persist in regular outdoor exercise, thereby driving positive health behavior change and outcomes.

A Gym Alternative:

A Low-Stress, Social Environment

The Center for Disease Control reported that among the US population, one in five adults exercises enough (150 minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity, plus muscle-building activity at least twice a week.) Outdoor adult fitness parks may be one of the greatest settings for students looking to begin an exercise regimen. Away from the pressures often perceived in a gym environment, outdoor adult fitness parks provide a low-stress, no-cost environment where students can go alone or in groups, enjoy walking as part of the overall exercise, enjoy the company of peers, and reap the benefits of vitamin D. While scientists have long known that vitamin D plays a key role in bone health, recent studies suggest that it is also essential for maintaining muscle mass. Vitamin D helps preserve the Type II muscle fibers that are prone to atrophy, especially as people age. Scientists recently noted that vitamin D helps support both muscle and bone tissue, and that low vitamin D levels may be associated with poor bone formation and muscle function.

Improving Memory and Brain Function

A new study conducted by researchers at the Center for Brain Health at The University of Texas at Dallas found that engaging in regular physical exercise also helps adults improve memory and brain health in addition to overall fitness. The physical training group participated for one hour, three times a week, for twelve weeks on a stationary bike or treadmill. The group's cognition, resting cerebral blood flow, and cardiovascular fitness were assessed prior to the beginning of the study, at the mid-point, and at the end. Researchers saw increase in brain blood flow to the anterior cingulate, indicating higher neuronal activity and metabolic rate.

What's equally impressive is the fact that exercising outside is proven to increase the length of time the exercise is performed. A 2012 study found that those who exercised outside did so for longer periods and more often than those working out indoors.

Specifically, the researchers asked people aged sixty-six or older about their exercise habits and then fitted them all with

electronic gadgets that measured their activity levels for a week. The gadgets and the survey showed that the volunteers who exercised outside, usually by walking, were significantly more physically active than those who exercised indoors, completing, on average, about thirty minutes more exercise each week than those who walked or otherwise exercised indoors.

When designing outdoor adult fitness parks, it is important to think of creating opportunities for a well-rounded workout, providing muscle resistance training, core development, aerobic activity, and opportunities to develop balance and flexibility; all of these elements are crucial for overall fitness. While indoor fitness areas generally achieve this balance due to the overwhelming amount of equipment to choose from, these four areas must be strategically planned in an outdoor fitness park, as there are on average fewer than fifteen pieces of equipment present in these environments.

Guidebooks such as *Outdoor Adult Fitness Parks, Best Practices for Promoting Community Health by Increasing Physical Activity* provide design guidance by way of charts that highlight the primary benefit of most outdoor fitness equipment, as well as a list and images of the muscles each piece will work. The guide provides an easy reference for facilities wanting to ensure the four elements of an effective workout are covered; it also cites several case studies on outdoor environments around the U.S. that have put the design guidelines into practice.

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