

A photograph of a gym interior. In the foreground, there is a piece of exercise equipment, possibly a stationary bike or elliptical, with a large flywheel. The gym has large windows on the right side, letting in bright sunlight. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greys, with a strong light source from the right creating a high-contrast scene. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT-DRIVEN RECREATION PROGRAMS

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

Notable studies have shown that student enrollment and retention have benefitted from universities creating a sense of belonging through involvement in recreation center activities. This sense of belonging is driven by student satisfaction with the number and types of activities offered at the campus recreation center, which has proven to be a major factor in why they either enrolled in the first place or returned to campus. Studies have also shown that students are persuaded by the confidence they can participate safely in recreation center activities and that they can use it as a space for interaction, creating a network of friends, and developing trust with their peers. Participation and even employment in campus recreation centers serve as potent vehicles through which transferable job skills are developed—and obviously, as students enjoy the facilities offered, not only are they healthier but more likely to participate in other campus-based activities. Campus recreation centers lift the collective mood of higher education, simultaneously instilling in students a sense of community and healthy habits while also helping to thwart the decline in student enrollment and retention.





Reexamining Recreation Center Operations with Student Input

More than just a place to exercise, the campus-based recreation center serves as a venue for education: users develop positive self-esteem, enhance their social relationships, and improve interpersonal skills. It also provides a unique site for student involvement in the development of programs and activities that meet the needs and expectations of a diverse community. Across the country, student input by way of feedback sessions and student-led organizations are central to the remaking of what recreation centers now offer. Work in the classroom or elsewhere can be a sedentary process, and students are actively showing investment in balancing their work with experiences that serve their physical and emotional well-being.

It is not uncommon for students to call for changes to existing recreation centers, may these changes be big or small. At Vanderbilt University, for instance, a student-led petition has pleaded for a change in the university recreation center's operating hours. The center has offered reduced hours since its reopening without reservation in August 2021. Students, however, needed more time to use the facilities. A student-led petition cited overcrowding at the center, contending that a return to pre-pandemic hours of operation would ease the overcrowding and allow students to socially distance if desired. Flyers with a QR code to sign were distributed outside of the center. The petition struck a chord with the student body, and now the campus community can enjoy for an extra hour each day what *The Princeton*

Review ranked in 2023 as the second-best Athletics Facilities in higher education.

Campus-oriented committees across the country are reaching out to students for suggestions about how they can help everyone achieve their highest level of health. Most pressing appears to be the need for equipment and facilities that are more inclusive and equitable for all ability levels and identities. It is common practice for committees to meet monthly as they review feedback forms, those which address student requests for facilities, programs, and accommodations, as well as feedback concerning accessibility and inclusivity issues. Universities are driven by the goal of providing fitness and fun in recreation to students from all backgrounds—but with different backgrounds come many different needs. By including the voices of all stakeholders, a campus recreation center achieves two goals: to provide nontraditional opportunities and accommodate for all who aspire to work out, and to make students feel comfortable advocating for what they'd like to see or to share why they've not used the recreation center in the past. Recreation centers now offer many accessibility accommodations, including ADA lockers, adaptable cardio machines and aquatic equipment, climbing wall and challenge course accommodations, accommodations for nursing parents, in addition to family and individual locker room spaces. For those who use wheelchairs, ample technology exists to maintain health and well-being. Wheelchair exercise equipment comes in many forms and can be tailored to the user's needs. These include recumbent cross trainers, training rollers, racing chairs, among many more. Recreation centers, at the suggestion of students, are also increasingly providing a 'changing places' facility; these are accessible changing areas with a toilet, changing bench, and shower all in one room.

Transferable Skills at Recreation Centers

The country's most impressive recreation centers embrace variety in their equipment and facilities precisely because this is what students want. It is no coincidence that many of the best recreation centers now

offer huge indoor and outdoor spaces that utilize exercise equipment for all levels of fitness. They commonly provide multiple functional fitness areas, fitness studios, a powerlifting space, an inclining running track, multi-activity courts, climbing towers, a bouldering wall, basketball courts, a resort-style pool and hot tub, lazy rivers, and even an outdoor rental center and bike shop. Let's not forget, too, the option of using a personal fitness trainer. The incredible range of exercise options not only reflects what students want, but it demonstrates the evolution of how we are harnessing our approach to health and wellness into a great recruitment and retention tool. Recreation centers represent for universities an avenue of self-empowerment amid a difficult economic landscape. They enhance the scale of our campus grounds and function as a destination point on campus—a hub for socialization, self-improvement, and relaxation.

For some students, recreation centers are also a place of employment where they develop transferable skills that benefit them socially and professionally. Some universities even tailor training and employment positions based on an annual survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), whose research has a long-standing history of applying quantitative data to forecast hiring trends in the job market. Student employment at campus recreation centers offers flexible hours to accommodate the student's academic schedule, and it provides ample opportunities for students to cross-train through different areas. Along the way, students develop customer service skills, conflict resolution strategies, and positive peer-to-peer relationships. It is also common practice for students to receive funding for certifications (First Aid, CPR, AED), opportunities to attend conferences and workshops, resume building, and interview practice. Job positions at recreation centers are wide-ranging and suitable for students with different skills. The majority emphasize peer-to-peer leadership, may it be in the form of group fitness instructor, personal trainer, field supervisor, or even adventure trip leader.

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Recreation Centers and Student Values

As of 2022, nearly 50% of surveyed college students agreed or strongly agreed that their health and wellness are priorities in daily life. It comes as little surprise that recreation centers not only influence student enrollment and retention but that students are increasingly eager to offer their own input as universities enhance their facilities. Campus-based recreation centers are a symbol of a university's commitment to students' well-being; they are also emblematic of students' values. Take, for instance, students' investment in global stewardship and sustainability. Recreation centers are going green. Across the country, we are seeing efforts to provide health and wellness spaces that are designed to meet the standards of LEED gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. Moreover, institutions of higher education are installing

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energy-saving and energy-generating equipment that reduce costs and offset carbon emissions. Such information can be conveyed digitally on the equipment itself, in turn showing students how their workouts are making an environmental difference. This adds a new dimension to what recreation centers can offer—a way for students to engage with greener solutions, and to do so in spaces that reflect their values.



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Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.




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