





Spaces That Spark Activity

WHAT GREAT FACILITIES MAKE POSSIBLE

BY ED BAUER

Walk across any college campus today and you'll notice something interesting: the recreation center is no longer just a place to lift weights or shoot hoops—it's a hub of student life. For private colleges and universities in particular, recreation programs have become a powerful tool for student engagement, retention, and overall well-being. But while programming matters, participation often hinges on something more foundational: the quality and accessibility of the facilities themselves.

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Simply put, students are far more likely to show up when the environment invites them in.

The First Impression Factor

Think of your recreation facilities the way prospective students do. When they step into a campus rec center—or walk past outdoor sports/recreation spaces during a tour—they are forming an impression. Is this a place where they can see themselves spending time? Is it welcoming? Does it feel modern, clean, and thoughtfully designed?

High-quality facilities send a clear message: this institution values student wellness.

Natural lighting, open layouts, and intuitive navigation can make a space feel less intimidating, especially for students who may not identify as “fitness people.” Comfortable seating areas, flexible-use rooms, and multipurpose courts create an environment that feels inclusive rather than exclusive. Not every student is looking for an intense workout—many are simply looking for a place to move, unwind, or connect with friends.

Outdoor spaces play an equally important role. Well-maintained fields, walking paths, and green spaces extend recreation beyond four walls. When thoughtfully designed, these areas encourage spontaneous use—pickup games, casual jogging, or even just time spent outdoors between classes.

Designing for Variety and Inclusion

One of the most common barriers to participation is the perception that recreation centers cater to a narrow group of students. Facilities that prioritize variety help break down that barrier.

A modern recreation program should support multiple types of engagement: group fitness classes, intramural sports, individual workouts, wellness programming, and informal recreation. This requires spaces that are flexible and adaptable. Studios that can transition from yoga to dance to strength training, courts that can host multiple sports, and outdoor areas that support both structured and casual use all contribute to broader participation.

Inclusivity also extends to how spaces are designed. Private workout areas, gender-inclusive locker rooms, and accessible equipment ensure that all students feel comfortable and represented. When students feel like a space was designed with them in mind, they are far more likely to use it.

The Indoor-Outdoor Connection

One of the most effective strategies campuses are embracing is the integration of indoor and outdoor recreation. Rather than treating these as separate entities, successful programs create a seamless experience between the two.

For example, recreation centers that open directly to outdoor fields or courtyards naturally encourage students to move between spaces. A student might start with a workout inside, then join a

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pickup soccer game outside, or wind down on a walking trail. This fluidity increases overall engagement without requiring additional programming.

Outdoor recreation programs—such as hiking clubs, intramural leagues, or wellness events—can further activate these spaces. Even simple additions like outdoor fitness equipment or shaded seating areas can significantly increase usage.

Programming Meets Place

Even the best facilities need thoughtful programming to bring them to life. However, the relationship between programming and space is often underestimated. The most successful recreation programs are those that align their offerings with how spaces are designed and used.

For instance, if a facility includes a prominent group fitness studio, it should be supported by a robust schedule of classes at

various times of day. If outdoor fields are a key feature, intramural and club sports should be structured to maximize their use.

Visibility is also critical. When students can see activity happening—whether it’s a packed fitness class or an intramural game—it creates a sense of energy and belonging. Transparent design elements, such as glass walls or open layouts, can help showcase these activities and draw others in.

Peer influence cannot be overstated. Students are more likely to participate when they see their friends and classmates engaged. Facilities that encourage social interaction—lounges, study areas, and shared spaces—help reinforce this dynamic.

Maintenance: The Silent Driver of Participation

A facility can be beautifully designed, but if it is not clean, functional, and well-maintained,

students will notice—and they will stop coming.

Consistency is key. Equipment should be in working order, spaces should be clean and well-lit, and outdoor areas should be regularly maintained. Small details, such as fresh paint, updated signage, and properly functioning lighting, contribute to a sense of care and professionalism.

Outdoor facilities require ongoing attention. Field conditions, landscaping, and lighting all impact usability. A poorly maintained field or dimly lit walking path can quickly become a deterrent, regardless of how strong the programming may be.

Lowering Barriers to Entry

Another critical factor in building participation is accessibility—both physical and psychological.

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Location matters. Recreation facilities should be centrally located or easily accessible from residence halls and academic buildings. Extended hours also make a significant difference, accommodating students with varying schedules.

Rec centers can enhance accessibility by offering introductory programs, beginner-friendly programs, and orientation. These help students feel more comfortable stepping into a recreation space for the first time.

Technology also support engagement. Mobile apps for class registration, facility updates, and program schedules make it easier for students to participate. Clear communication—through signage, social media, and campus platforms—ensures that students know what is available and how to get involved.

Building a Culture, Not Just a Program

Ultimately, the goal is not just to increase participation numbers—it is to build a culture of recreation and wellness across campus.

This happens when facilities, programming, and student engagement align to create an environment where movement is a natural part of daily life. It is when students see recreation not as an obligation, but as an opportunity to relieve stress, build community, and enhance their overall college experience.

Private colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to lead in this area. With the ability to invest in high-quality facilities and tailor programs to their student populations, they can create recreation experiences that are both impactful and memorable.

In the end, it comes down to a simple idea: if you build spaces that students want to be in, and support them with thoughtful

programming and consistent maintenance, participation will follow. And when participation grows, so does the sense of connection, well-being, and vitality that defines a thriving campus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He worked on the staff at Mount Union College.

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HOW CAMPUS RECREATION WILL POWER THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABILITY

While sustainability has been a priority across higher education for years, there is a growing recognition that climate leadership requires more than intent. It requires focused, metric-driven strategies, infrastructure, accountability, and measurable impact.

As institutions assess and prioritize potential investments that will accelerate progress, one answer is emerging in an unexpected place: campus recreation.

Why Campus Recreation Rises to the Top

Campus recreation centers are among the most energy-intensive facilities on any university campus. Extended operating hours, dense equipment loads, and high daily utilization make them significant contributors to overall energy consumption. At the same time, these facilities are highly visible, deeply embedded in student life, and uniquely positioned to influence behavior and engagement.

Brown University's Climate Action Plan 2040

In 2019, Brown University introduced its Sustainability Strategic Plan with an ambitious mandate: reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent by 2025 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2040. Rather than pursue a broad array of initiatives with incremental impact, Brown's leadership assessed where targeted investments could deliver rapid, substantial, and quantifiable results.

Campus recreation emerged as one of those opportunities. And the idea was actually born out of the classroom.

From Classroom Insight to Campus-Wide Impact

For the final project of a Climate Solutions course, student Elina Pipa focused her research on how to achieve Brown's climate targets.

"I got the image of a hamster running on a wheel, and then that producing electricity,"

Pipa said. "And I was like, whoa. Does that technology exist for humans?"

It does. The research project revealed that installing SportsArt's energy-generating fitness equipment in the campus recreation center could reduce the facility's total emissions by approximately two percent. That's an impact comparable to the solar panels installed on the building's roof.

Pipa presented her business proposal to Athletics Department leadership, securing a pilot of 17 energy-generating treadmills, ellipticals, rowers, steppers, and cycles installed in The Nelson Fitness Center.

After positive feedback from users, the project became permanent, directing energy back into the building. For students, the project demonstrated how academic research can translate into operational change. For the institution, it reinforced the evolving role of

SportsArt

recreation facilities as platforms for sustainability leadership.

"This initiative advances the goals set forth in our Climate Action Plan 2040 by combining innovative technology, student engagement, and measurable impact," said Amy Dean, Associate Director of Athletics, Recreation at Brown. "It's an example of how athletics and recreation can embed sustainability into the fabric of campus life."

The Installation: Aligning Fitness with Climate Goals

The recent SportsArt installation at the Nelson Fitness Center includes:

- Five ECO-POWR™ cycles
- Two ECO-POWR™ steppers
- Six ECO-NATURAL™ treadmills
- One SENZA™ recumbent cycle
- Three SENZA™ upright cycles

Rather than consuming electricity from the grid, those units with SportsArt's innovative ECO-POWR™ technology, capture the human energy produced during exercise and convert it into clean energy that is fed back into

the facility's electrical system. This installation alone has the potential to generate approximately **3,136 kilowatt-hours of energy annually**, turning fitness participation into a measurable environmental outcome.

SportsArt equipment is engineered for high-traffic environments, offering smooth biomechanics, intuitive controls, and long-lasting durability. These revolutionary cardio machines demonstrate that environmental responsibility and commercial-grade performance are not mutually exclusive.

"We're proud to see Brown University integrate ECO-POWR™ and ECO-NATURAL™ equipment into its sustainability initiatives," said Ruben Mejia, Executive Vice President of SportsArt Americas. "By making green fitness a core part of campus recreation, Brown is showing how climate solutions can be embedded into everyday activity."

A New Role for Campus Recreation

For Brown University, the Nelson Fitness Center project reflects a broader institutional commitment to innovation, collaboration, and

climate leadership. For students, it creates a tangible connection between personal wellness and global impact.

"This project highlights the intersection of research, student initiative, and institutional action," said Dean. "It's exciting to see classroom ideas translated into lasting impact for both the university and the environment."

More broadly, the installation signals a shift in how the industry defines performance. In future-ready recreation centers, success is no longer measured solely by utilization or durability, but by how effectively a facility supports sustainability goals, engages its community, and contributes to long-term resilience.

