

The Student Recreation Center: Underutilized Resource for Improving Student Retention

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This article presents the findings of a study to determine the impact of college students' use of a campus recreation center on their retention at a four-year public institution. The usage data was gathered over two years and examined the retention rate of first-time, full-time students from their first to second fall semester. Findings show that usage of the recreation center positively correlates with retention.

Keywords: recreation center, retention, student success, wellbeing

The retention of first-time full-time students is a concern for most institutions of higher education; this concern has led to a large body of research on the possible causes of low retention rates as well as potential strategies to increase those rates. One key finding from the research is that student engagement in co-curricular programming contributes to increased retention rates, regardless of the *type* of programming (Burke, 2019), in part because students who are engaged in co-curricular activities on campus tend to have more positive states of mental health, possess a greater sense of well-being, are less likely to partake in substance abuse, and demonstrate fewer occurrences of depression and anxiety (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012). These positive consequences, which can be realized through student participation in all varieties of co-curricular events such as plays, musical

performances, club or intramural sports, speakers, and so forth (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Burke, 2019; Jorgenson et al., 2018; Mars, 2022), ultimately lay the foundation for student retention by fostering an overall sense of well-being.

One resource, common to most college and university campuses, that offers a wide variety of co-curricular programming and helps foster a sense of community is the student recreation center. Over the past two decades, studies have shown that these recreation centers offer numerous benefits to students, such as social well-being, which in turn lead to academic success (Mars, 2022; Sanderson, 2017). Furthermore, students who use their campus recreation centers are more likely to persist in college than their non-user counterparts (Belch et al., 2001). To determine whether our campus recreation center plays a role in promoting student retention, we conducted a research study that compared the retention rate of first-time full-time students at our institution who used the campus recreation center to the retention rate of their counterparts who did not make use of this resource.

Findings and Strategies for Practice

Through our study at a suburban, public, four-year institution in the southeast, we examined the participation data for our institution's recreation center over a two-year period and compared the one-year retention rate of first-time full-time students who used the recreation center to the one-year retention rate of those who did not use the recreation center. Our methodology was to identify incoming cohorts who utilized the recreation center for comparison to incoming cohorts who were non-users of the recreation center. The first-time, full-time cohort in Table 1 includes 4887 students, and Table 2 includes 5207 students, for a total sample size of 10,094 for the two cohorts. Our findings show a correlation between recreation center usage and increased retention. Specifically, the retention data for students who made use of the recreation center facility and programming was statistically significant, even if those students only visited the center once during the semester. The data further revealed that the percentage of first-year full-time students who visited the recreation center twenty or more times during the semester were retained at an even higher rate. While this finding suggests that making use of the recreation center may foster student persistence, engaging with the campus recreation center and the programming it offers has the added benefit of promoting each student's individual well-being by offering a meeting place that allows for social connections, facilitating increased physical wellness, and building community through engaging programs.

Table 1***One-Year Retention Rates for First-Time Full-Time Students Based on Recreation Center Usage for Fall 2015 (Merritt, 2017)***

Category	Cohort	One-Year Retention Rate
Total First-Time Full-Time Cohort	4887	80.1
Did Not Use Recreation Facilities	1568	73.5
Used Recreation Facilities One or More Times	3319	83.2
Used Recreation Facilities One to 19 Times	2629	82.9
Used Recreation Facilities 20 or More Times	690	84.3

Note: Results indicate a significant increase in the retention rate of students who use recreation facilities with a retention rate of 83.2% (2761/3319), compared to the 73.5% (1152/1568) retention rate of students who do not use recreation facilities ($p < 0.0001$).

Note: Usage of the facility is captured by a digital check-in system that scans each student's campus ID when they enter the recreation center.

Note: Data revealed that students who visited the recreation center 20 or more times during the semester (an average of 1.5 times per week in a 16-week semester) experienced the greatest impact on their retention.

Table 2***One-Year Retention Rates for First-Time Full-Time Students Based on Recreation Center Usage for Fall 2016 (Merritt, 2017)***

Category	Cohort	One-Year Retention Rate
Total First-Time Full-Time Cohort	5207	78.3
Did Not Use Recreation Facilities	1418	73.1
Used Recreation Facilities 1 or More Times	3789	80.2
Used Recreation Facilities 1 to 19 Times	2692	79.2
Used Recreation Facilities 20 or More Times	1097	82.9

Note: Results indicate a significant increase in the retention rate of students who use recreation facilities with a retention rate of 80.2% (3040/3789), compared to the 73.1% (1037/1418) retention rate of students who do not use recreation facilities ($p < 0.0001$).

Note: Usage of the facility is captured by a digital check-in system that scans each student's campus ID when they enter the recreation center.

Note: Data revealed that students who visited the recreation center 20 or more times during the semester (an average of 1.5 times per week in a 16-week semester) experienced the greatest impact on their retention.

Although the potential benefits of using the recreation center are significant, data from our recreation center revealed that, on average, fewer than 25% of first-time full-time students at our institution used the recreation center. In an effort to increase student usage of the recreation center, we engaged in several targeted and intentional strategies to acquaint students with our institution's recreation center and all it has to offer. Below is a list that includes successful strategies that we have employed, as well as potential strategies that we hope to adopt in the future:

1. Encourage faculty who teach first-time full-time students to share information about the recreation center with their students and/or to invite recreation center staff to speak to their classes.
2. Offer engagement opportunities associated with the recreation center, facilitated by peer leaders, that are designed specifically for first-time full-time students.
3. Utilize the institution's LMS/online platform to offer a monthly "Ask your recreation center staff" engagement opportunity.
4. Develop a first-year course assignment that requires students to visit the recreation center and write a brief essay reflecting on their experience.
5. Create "Family Day" events and send invitations to parents, inviting them to join their students at the recreation center for engaging activities and events.
6. Offer a 5k walk/run or another interactive event sponsored by the recreation center that requires students to visit the center at least once in order to register for the event.
7. Develop specific programs within the recreation center that target first-time full-time students, such as:
 - a. A monthly open house
 - b. Regularly scheduled or on-demand tours to help students learn about the facilities, activities, and programming and to meet the recreation center staff.
 - c. Dedicated "first-time full-time students only" days once a month each fall semester to encourage the participation of incoming students.
 - d. Around the Recreation Center (ARC) engagement opportunity that invites students to participate in ARC activities once a week throughout the semester. Each weekly activity would be designed to introduce students to a different opportunity, activity, or program available through the recreation center. Students who successfully complete each week's activity could be awarded an ARC Certificate of completion or earn a prize, such as a t-shirt or other giveaway.
8. Offer micro-credentials and/or a certificate in Wellness Engagement that can be shared digitally and/or listed on the student's resume.

9. Gamify the various opportunities available at the recreation center by developing an app that allows students to compete with one another, individually or as part of a team, to earn points for engaging with the recreation center and use those accrued points to earn prizes or rewards.
10. Create engaging marketing materials that will attract student attention by asking intriguing questions (i.e., How high can you climb? How many free throws can you make in one minute?) or by highlighting cutting-edge equipment or activities offered by the recreation center (e.g., virtual-reality exercise equipment, rowing simulators, outdoor adventure programs, etc.).

Discussion

Retention is key if students are to achieve academic success and graduate in a timely fashion. To increase retention and, in turn, improve graduation rates, administrators, faculty, and staff need to seek out high-impact experiences that can be offered to students without depleting institutional resources that may be limited in the wake of revenues lost due to the COVID pandemic.

The findings of this study echo those of previously published research, and the proffered strategies derived from our findings provide practical approaches for maximizing the positive impact of student recreation centers on retention through relatively inexpensive means. Those strategies, intentionally designed for inclusion in first-year programs at institutions nationally and internationally, can be implemented at any institution that possesses some type of recreational facility and/or that offers physical activities or wellness programming.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this study offer insight to institutions seeking to improve and/or advance their efforts to effectively engage students in health and wellness opportunities that have the potential to not only offer the immediate rewards of a well-balanced student with a greater sense of belonging but also to contribute to institutional retention efforts. As responsible world citizens and committed educators, we should be invested in the physical and emotional well-being of our students and seek to promote initiatives that have both short-term and long-term benefits for students – in both their personal lives as well as their academic careers. It is this commitment to our students' well-being that will ultimately lead to the increased retention and graduation rates that have become the hallmark of student success at most institutions of higher learning.

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