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The Power of Play for Wellness: Supporting Wellness Initiatives on Campus

Shelby L. Hinkle Smith

This reflection seeks to highlight the role that access to institutional support and promotion of wellness opportunities plays in the overall health and wellbeing of students and the campus community. Opportunities for participation in wellness programming have helped me improve my self-esteem, grieve the loss of my grandmother, battle depression, believe that I could do things that I never thought I could, stay in school, find purpose and meaning in my life, and build connections with others who have become essential people in my social support network. As a student, lifelong learner, and collegiate recreation professional, I believe it is imperative to have adequate campus resources available to students to support them on their personal journey of health and wellness. Research exploring the impact of recreational services upon users indicates that numerous positive benefits are associated with participation, including academic success (Becker, Cooper, Atkins, & Martin, 2009; Belch, Gebel, & Mass, 2001; Brock, Carr, & Todd, 2015; Danbert, Pivarnik, McNeil, & Washington, 2014; Todd, Czynszon, Carr, & Pratt, 2009), life skills development, and wellness development (NASPA Consortium, 2014). Resources such as campus recreation, outreach and education, and clinical services should work strategically in concert to provide services, programs, and educational opportunities to meet the wellness needs of a diverse student body and campus community.

Dr. Hinkle Smith is the Associate Director of Campus Recreation-Programs in the Department of Athletics at the University of Vermont where she has worked for over eight years. She is the chair of the Campus Recreation Student Development Committee, Co-Chair of the Catamounts Professional Development Committee, and a member of the National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association's (NIRSA) Student Development Committee. Dr. Hinkle Smith also serves as a lecturer, teaching courses within UVM's Health and Wellness Residential Learning Community.

Through playing, skiing, and learning, I have been able to work through periods of depression, transition, and grief. Playing and learning are my paths to feeling emotionally, socially, intellectually, and physically well. Being “well” for me is laughing, being inspired, feeling good about myself and my capabilities, inspiring and leading others, accomplishing all required daily tasks, and exercising. In sharing this reflection of pursuing personal wellness, I seek to illustrate how opportunities provided by campus resources have supported and continue to support my journey. This is my own path. This is who I am: White, middle class, heterosexual, female. My hope is that pieces of my life resonate for others and inspire them to explore what resources are available on a college campus to support them in their own pursuit of wellness, as well as to encourage college administrators to think critically about how and what services are being offered on their campus.

High School

By the time I started high school, I had been ski racing since second grade and, since fourth grade, playing in the school district’s summer field hockey league. It was natural to continue competing in these sports as part of the high school’s programs. As a first year, I added track and field to my sport roster and fared well, but the track program was less structured, less challenging, and less fun. As a sophomore, I decided to not run track, but I did not want to remain idle, so a friend and I decided to plan daily after-school activities for us. We spent each afternoon learning and doing something different, with each day having a theme that repeated from week to week. This had us dabbling in everything from learning how to properly pitch a baseball to how to do the jitterbug. We laughed, stayed active and fit, and learned some exciting new skills. This was indicative of how I approached my life at that time. If something was not happening, I found something to do and usually recruited several friends to come along for the ride. When I finally had my own car, I had a bin of sporting goods in the back so that play could happen at any moment. I learned that if something was not available to me, I had the power to create opportunities. I craved learning and I loved play; these activities engaged me as an active participant in my life. By the end of high school, I was dubbed “Most Likely to Change the World” by my senior class and was ready for something new.

College, Round One: Undergraduate Studies

I started college at the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU-Boulder) when I was 17 years old. The transition from a small upstate New York town to a more progressive Colorado city was challenging. My residence hall housed the same number of people that had been in my entire high school. I was shy, overwhelmed, without friends, and yet so excited to find myself in a place that

had bluebird skies, big mountains to ski, and my major of choice (kinesiology). I finally found a few friends after I strategically planned to sit at a table for breakfast with a girl from my floor whom I had noticed had not been sitting with anyone else for a week. It took every ounce of courage I had to sit at that table and start a conversation with this complete stranger. When I recall that moment, I still feel that powerful yearning for a social connection. I became friends with “Breakfast Girl” and ended up forging a deeper connection and friendship with her roommate, Heidi.

These social connections were important first steps in meeting new people, building my confidence, and becoming involved on campus in activities that helped me be myself again. I joined the club field hockey team and, along with Heidi and some new friends, I began going to the recreation center to swim and use the diving well. I learned how to dive off the three-meter platform. It was new, scary, and incredibly fun. We played outdoors, skied on the mountains, and partied; all this play was an easy distraction from real life and my academics began to suffer. This was an indicator of my continued struggle with the transition to such a big place where structures, rules, and systems of accountability were lacking outside of my residence hall. I was still extremely self-conscious, had low self-esteem, and missed my friends and the ease of life in my hometown. I wanted to take a year off to travel and ski. My parents said, “No, you will never go back.” Studying was not my priority, and I ended up on academic probation after my first semester. All signs pointed to low self-esteem, depression, and the “freshman 15.”

Returning to college for the second half of my first year, I began to take advantage of the opportunities provided on campus. Along with practicing my new diving skill, I began to swim regularly at the recreation center and joined Campus Recreation’s 100 Mile Club (run, swim and/or bike 100 miles over the course of the semester). My friends and I skied every weekend. I focused more on school and I started to feel like myself again. I still partied and made plenty of poor choices, but through the development of a supportive social network, I learned how to self-regulate in a place where I was solely responsible for my self-care. I got off of academic probation. In my sophomore year, I joined the club alpine ski team and took greater advantage of the recreation center and its opportunities, as it was a place where I felt free to be me and participate in things that I loved to do. Without these opportunities to play and learn I would have lost the structure I needed to stay focused and successful in navigating the emotional, social, and intellectual challenges of college.

The improvement of my academics and wellness that resulted from regularly utilizing the recreational services is common among college students. Research exploring the connection between campus recreation participation and grade

point average (GPA) has demonstrated that students who participate in the use of recreation services are more academically successful than non-users (Becker, Cooper, Atkins, & Martin, 2009; Belch, Gebel, & Mass, 2001; Brock, Carr, & Todd, 2015; Danbert, Pivarnik, McNeil, & Washington, 2014; Todd, Czyszczon, Carr, & Pratt, 2009). Additionally, being socially connected to the institution is associated with students being more likely to remain in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). My challenging transition to college was not unique; although high school students may have an understanding of how to get into college, they often have a limited understanding of what it takes to successfully transition into college (Hirsch, 2010). Hirsch (2010) suggested that if first-year students had access to services like peer mentoring and first-year seminars, student retention would increase. I may have benefitted from similar services had these types of programs been available, thus helping to reduce the negative impact of the transition on my personal wellness and academic success.

I graduated from CU-Boulder a semester early and was again faced with learning how to cope with a new transition. I needed to work while my friends and roommates were still in school. The life I had created as an undergraduate student was quickly transformed into one of unease, a real job, and limited access to opportunities for play. Five months after graduation, I called my dad and told him I needed him to come and get me. I was depressed, felt unconnected, and was in a relationship where I was struggling with being both independent and interdependent.

College, Round Two: Master's Degree

After spending a year at home in upstate New York, doing therapy, substitute teaching, and spending time with other college graduates, I knew it was time for me to go to graduate school so that I could begin working to achieve my career goals. I felt emotionally prepared for this transition. I moved to Athens, Ohio to do an intensive nine-month graduate program in athletic administration at Ohio University. I was fortunate to live with some great people, and I met many other peers through my program. We were all there to study some aspect of sport, so we were like-minded in what we enjoyed doing for our wellness. My new university had an incredible new recreation center with many opportunities for physical pursuits. I was able to easily find my sense of self by swimming, learning to play basketball with new friends, teaching, and studying something I enjoyed. It was a quick and busy year that showed me I could go to school to learn something I enjoyed and have fun while being supported by my new community. Not only was it one of the most fun years of my life, I earned a master's degree, too.

Higher Education Professional, Round One

A few months after graduate school I started a job in campus recreation at a private engineering institution. Until this job, despite all that time participating in club and intramural sports, and using the recreation center, it never occurred to me that my love for play was a professional path that I could follow. In my role, I was primarily responsible for assisting in the management of the intramural sports program and the fitness center, which included supervising the entire student staff. I established good working relationships with my colleagues while also navigating the challenges of supervising students who were 2-5 years younger than me. As a professional, I began to see first-hand the benefits that participation in recreational opportunities provided for the students. Student staff members were learning professional leadership and management skills while doing something that they enjoyed. Student participants were having fun when they got a break from studying to either exercise or play the sport of their choice with their friends. As a professional, I continued on a path to pursuing my own wellness through learning to weight train and to throw the football “long.” However, I was feeling a bit unchallenged in my work as I felt like I could do something that would have a greater impact in the world of sport. I applied to doctoral programs and went back to Colorado, embarking on yet another transition.

College, Round Three: Doctoral Program

Beginning my doctoral program was a transition that rivaled only that of my transition to CU-Boulder. Not only did I have responsibilities to the institution as a teaching assistant while taking a full load of classes, I was also extremely overwhelmed and was engaging in quite a bit of negative self-talk as well as obsessive exercise. I was feeling so out of control in my day-to-day life and exercising was the only thing over which I felt I had control. I understood what this was doing to me emotionally and physically, so I made an appointment to see a counselor at the health center. She pointed out that my negative self-talk was a self-fulfilling prophecy and was making me feel the way I thought I was, which was “crazy.” Shifting that internal dialogue was tough because I was still challenged by school and adjusting to my new life, but it helped me move into a better place emotionally. I was busy, overwhelmed, and keeping my head just above water, but because this was round three at college I was more adept at figuring out how to self-regulate and knowing how to take care of myself. I took advantage of the recreational facilities and got back to running, swimming, and weightlifting.

Socially, I met many new friends who were all at different points in their lives. Some were married with children, some were in the military, and some were full-

time professionals. All of us were there to get our doctorates in sport and exercise science. Each of us had our own stories about how we were inspired by sport, play, or movement, leading to a professional path in sport. I found a friend who battled issues of wellness similar to my own we became workout partners, which kept us accountable and having fun. This community support complemented my commitment to exercise and was critical in my ability to successfully navigate this part of my life.

Higher Education Professional, Round Two

As a result of my personal experiences, I wanted to combine serving as a mentor to college students with providing quality recreational opportunities on a college campus. When I first arrived eight years ago at the University of Vermont (UVM) to work as the Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, I oversaw all aspects of the intramural sports program on campus, in which more than 25 percent of the student body (undergraduate, graduate and medical students) was participating (Annual Report, 2014). In this position, there was a large amount of day-to-day program management that was often taxing. Yet, when I attended the intramural sport championship games, I realized all of the work was worth it as the students' energy and excitement was palpable. These moments served as reminders that I was responsible for producing a program full of opportunities where students had the chance to engage in physical activity/sport, social engagement, and stress relieving activity.

Now in my current role as the Associate Director of Campus Recreation-Programs, fitness programs (e.g., group fitness, personal training) and intramural sports (over 25 league and team sports) are under my purview and I have direct oversight of the physical education basic instruction program (one-credit academic physical activity courses), youth and community programs, assessment, and student development initiatives for our student staff. With this more global perspective, I have had the opportunity to see the positive impact that participation in any of our programs has had on students, as 86 percent of the student body participates in opportunities provided by Campus Recreation (Annual Report, 2014). Being in this position has also provided different opportunities for getting involved with campus partners (e.g., Student Life, Living Well, Wellness Environment) in planning programs such as Rec Fest (an opening weekend event for first-year students) and Cats Night Out (special event held on the last night of the semester).

In the 2013-2014 academic year, UVM Campus Recreation participated in a benchmarking assessment which revealed that UVM students believed their involvement in the opportunities that UVM Campus Recreation provided had positively impacted their wellness and life skills development (NASPA Consortium, 2014). These wellness-related skills included: overall health, fitness,

ability to develop friendships, managing stress, ability to get a good night's sleep, sense of belonging and association, and self-confidence. The life skills that were significantly impacted were: academic performance, time management, and concentration. Ultimately, students who participated in Campus Recreation activities and programs reported that these experiences have expanded their interest in staying fit and healthy. The data highlight the importance of the role that Campus Recreation services provide to students on campus as they aim to successfully navigate the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual challenges associated with their college experience.

UVM benchmarking data support existing research in the academic and health benefits associated with participation in campus recreation services and programs (Becker et al., 2009; Belch, Gebel, & Mass, 2001; Brock et al., 2015; Danbert et al., 2014; Todd et al., 2009). Campus recreation, however, is not the only campus office that provides services that support student wellness (e.g., clinical health care, outreach and education services, mental health services). The American College Health Association's (ACHA) Healthy Campus 2020 (2015) provides a framework for campuses to follow when working to improve the health and wellness of the campus community. The ACHA identified the number one characteristic of a healthy campus initiative as "a network of people working toward a common vision" (2015). In considering the ACHA's recommendation, UVM leadership should critically examine what services are being provided on campus that support student health and wellness and reflect upon whether an adequate and appropriate organizational structure is in place to ensure that an effective, cohesive, diverse, timely, fiscally responsible, and quality set of programs and services are being provided. Health and wellness-related units on a campus should be working together strategically toward a common vision. Campus offices would then be working in concert to offer complementary services rather than competing or contradictory services. This will not only ensure that the best programming and services are being provided to students and the campus community, but that funding is responsibly and adequately allocated according to the common vision and strategic plan. Additionally, services and programs should be sufficiently financed so programs can be offered for little or no cost to any student or campus community member pursuing personal wellness. Creating and implementing a strategic, proactive, and unified approach to coordinating wellness initiatives (e.g., health care, education and outreach, programming, facilities) can support the holistic wellness of campus community members.

Conclusion

During my time at the University of Vermont, I faced the loss of my grandmother with whom I was extremely close, which sent me into a tailspin from which I still do not feel I have completely rebounded. I applied for new jobs that I wanted

and did not get, battled depression, suffered from anxiety, got married, and had my first child. These different transitions and stressors have been challenging to varying degrees, making self-care difficult. I have, however, been fortunate to build up a social network of friends who share similar values and share a love of play. I have been fortunate to have access to a variety of opportunities to pursue wellness solely because I am on UVM's campus. It is in these moments of play and learning that I feel extremely happy, confident, and truly myself. This feeling extends into the rest of my life as I am inspired to do good work to support others in their journey toward personal wellness, take things on with an air of confidence, laugh a lot, and inspire others around me to do what they love and to do it well.

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