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Ethnographic Study Examining UNC Student Exercise Behaviors at the Rec Center

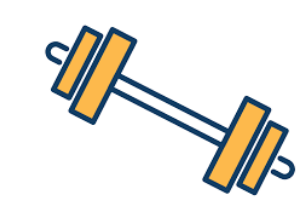


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Introduction

Health and well-being have been found to positively contribute to student productivity, academic success, improvement in the quality of life, and enrollment retention (Plotnikoff et al., 2015). Since December 2019, the strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) has called for rather sudden changes, with various states across the country have had various responses to health and safety regulations (Painter et al., 2021). As a result, many individuals have been affected in some way, shape or form. With the campus-wide closures at the University of Northern Colorado since March 2020, there have been various degrees of adjustments made in order to adhere to the Center for Disease and Control's (CDC) health and safety recommendations. There have been extensive health measures to restrict physical proximity and contact with others and increase social distancing. The change in curriculum delivery has affected how faculty are to deliver information, and how students are to learn their coursework. As a result of the nationwide adjustments relating to education and the physical limitations related to the pandemic, the more challenges there are to achieve physical interaction, social support, and connection among college/university students for their mental and physical health.



Purpose/Research Questions

The purpose of the mini ethnographical study was to assess if physical activity/exercise/fitness behaviors changed during the current pandemic climate. The research questions were:

1. Are there apparent exercise behavior changes among students and student-staff?
2. Have the COVID-19 regulations changed the kind and amount of interaction among students and student-staff in relation to exercise, fitness, and physical activity In the Rec Center?

Methodology

Through an ethnographic approach, the study aimed to capture the essence and behaviors of students who currently utilize the Recreation Center into their daily routine. Gathering the data was done with intent by critically analyzing the behaviors and actions through observation and two in-depth interviews (Madison, 2021) of the students. The lead investigator observed 20 hours of student interaction and activity at the Recreation Center on various days and times of a given day to understand the culture, activity, and behaviors at the Recreation (Rec) Center. The Recreation Center experienced two different capacity mandates during the course of the Spring 2021 semester (25% and 50% capacity). Observations were conducted throughout the Rec Center with the observations conducted throughout all parts of the facility to observe exercise behaviors and interactions among students and student-staff. Exercise orientations (alone or in a group), conversations, and activity were recorded to attempt to understand the current culture of the UNC study population that frequented the facility. In addition, the lead researcher conducted two individual semi-structured interviews. One interview was with a student who frequented the facility for PA and exercise, and the other was of a student-staff member who spoke to their experiences with the maintenance and interactions with the students while operating the Rec Center. Once the data was collected through manual journal entry, the results were then analyzed and then coded. The coding was then used to create a thematic analyses of the data thus far.

Preliminary Results



Themes:

The Individual

- Students arrived at the Rec Center by themselves often exercising with personal devices separate from others.
- Behaviors surrounding the self and less interactions between two people, unless it was made clear they were roommates or very close friends.
- Evident with the use of personal devices
- Use of devices for physical activity
- Utilization of spaces for the self without the company of others

Identification

- Most students used specific areas of the Rec Center based on comfort.
- Male students seemed to use more of the second weight/strength training room under the indoor track
- Female students use the second floor and mats in the indoor track

Privacy

Discussion Points

Recommendations for health and safety seems to change exercise behaviors within the UNC Rec Center. The study was a modified study since there were regulations with regard to space and capacity during the first two months of the Spring 2021 semester. In critically observing the different areas of the center, it was important to note the differences in exercise behaviors and be respectful of individuals' exercise spaces especially during the pandemic. The noticeable shifts in behavior between students and student-employees was evident. The implications for this study may present challenges when fully assimilating students and staff to use the center when there may be fewer restrictions next semester. Since students have had to dramatically adjust their behaviors to exercise in the center, there may be increased motivation or desire to utilize the gym once the health and safety regulations are lifted. Additional efforts may need to be made to communicate what services and programs are available for student health. Some of the limitations to the study were the capacities to observe with minding a distance from the students and the student staff. In addition, the researcher could not observe at all points of the day during the week because of scheduling conflicts.

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