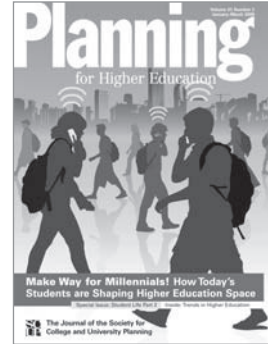


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Collegiate Recreational Sports

Pivotal Players in Student Success

The importance of a bona fide campus recreation sports/wellness program cannot be overstated.

by **Kent J. Blumenthal**

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Recreational Sports Road Trip

Amazing. It's simply amazing.

Trying to find the right college, the right "fit," for a college-bound high school senior is a complex process. Now take it up a notch. It's not just any child who's going to college; it's your child. Ratchet it up still more. It's your daughter, and she's your only child. She's the light of your life and the gleam in your eye. She's Daddy's Girl.

Take everything you know, everything you've learned, every bit of wisdom imparted by friends and colleagues both within and outside of academia, and mix it with the formidable combination of the common application, supplemental applications, grade point average, class rank, essays, standardized test scores, the free application for Federal Student Aid, tax returns, loans, and your daughter's vacillating interest between a degree in engineering or government and politics (huh?). What do you get? Stress. Confusion. Worry. Intimidation.

My dad often reminded me that "there's more than one route to the center of a city." That pretty much sums up how I've come to appreciate and understand collegiate recreational sports, and it's helped me to process what I've learned on college tours. I've travelled at least five avenues into the heart of this higher education bastion of recreation, health, and wellness: as an intramural participant, director of a campus recreation program, student of recreation and leisure services, executive director of the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), and now as a parent of a college-bound high school senior.

Each route has offered a different lens through which to view form and purpose. Combined, these experiences have given me a special vantage point—an opportunity to see beyond what meets the eye and to appreciate the skills, discipline, forethought, and resources required to deliver cutting-edge recreational programs, services, and facilities to a wide and diverse college or university community. This latest excursion, as a parent, may be the most telling.

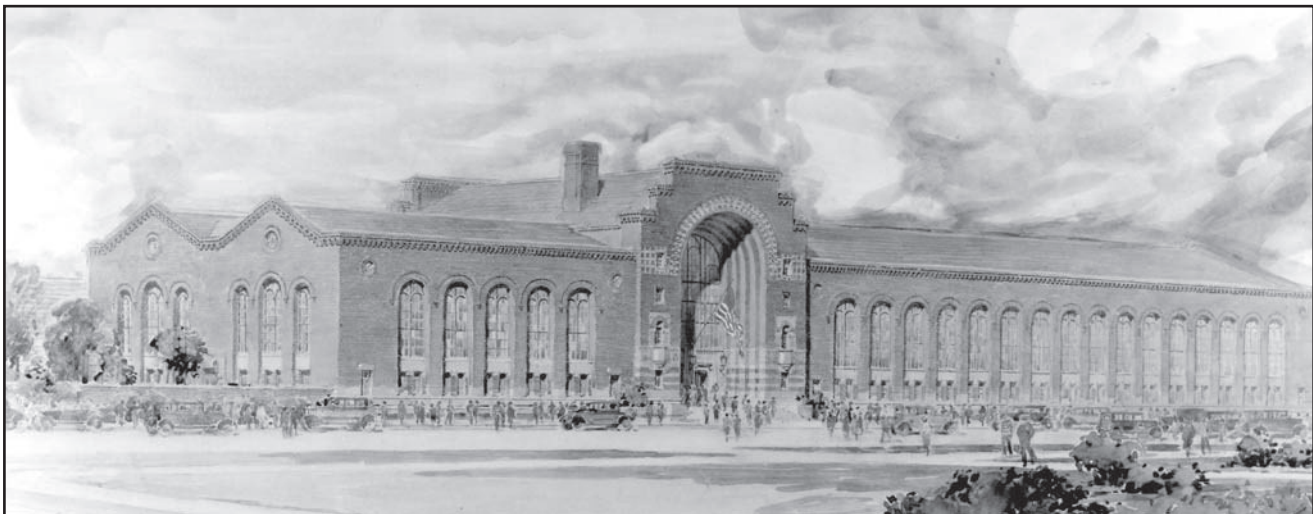
Every college student is some parent's child, and our desire for our children's happiness and well-being is paramount. Our concerns may have changed somewhat over time as they have grown and matured, but not in any real sense. As parents, we still worry (and may always worry) about their personal safety. We want them to be good students—not just to do well grade-wise, but to learn, too. We want our children to find a wholesome community of friends to spend free time with, and we want them to be perpetual learners both inside and outside the classroom, although not necessarily via the "school of hard knocks." Simply put, we want our children to be happy, healthy, and smart. Colleges and universities can serve as our surrogates and, with a well-developed and executed collegiate recreational sports program, create an environment where the odds of this happening are improved.

The Evolution of Recreational Sports in Student Life

Both the breadth and scope of today's collegiate recreational sports programs and facilities have grown exponentially since the earliest intramural programs began in the late 1800s under the auspices of physical education teachers or varsity coaches. The first dedicated intramural facilities were established in the early 1900s, and the first departments of intramural athletics were created at the University of Michigan and Ohio State University in 1913. The sole purpose of these new departments was to organize and schedule sporting activities for the recreational enjoyment of students under the direction of one person (NIRSA 2008a). Figures 1 and 2—depicting the University of Michigan Intramural Sports Building, built in 1927-28, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Student Recreation and Wellness Center, opened in 2007—illustrate how facility design elements have changed over the past 80 years.

In 1948, Dr. William Wasson of Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana received a \$500 Carnegie Grant-in-Aid to tour and study intramural programs at historically black colleges. After the study was completed, Wasson

Figure 1 **University of Michigan Intramural Sports Building—1927, completed 1928**



Architect's rendering of the University of Michigan Intramural Sports Building, built in 1927-1928.
Photo courtesy of the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association

Figure 2 **University of Nevada, Las Vegas Student Recreation and Wellness Center—2007**



The Student Recreation and Wellness Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas opened in 2007.
Photo courtesy of Hastings & Chivetta Architects/Sam Fentress Photography

recommended the formation of an intramural athletics association, and Dillard University took the initial step in its organization by extending an invitation to the schools that had participated in Wasson's study. The first intramural conference convened on February 22, 1950 at Dillard University with 22 African-American intramural directors from 11 historically black colleges. That meeting resulted in the formation of the National Intramural Association (NIA), the predecessor of NIRSA (NIRSA 2008a).

Over time, intramural programs diversified and participation increased. A societal push toward greater gender equity, including implementation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, coupled with the increasing popularity of aerobic exercise resulted in an influx of women into competitive athletics, including collegiate recreational sports. As these programs continued to grow, gaining both student and institutional support, additional multifaceted facilities were built, many of which were exclusively for recreational sports activities (NIRSA 2007c). These initiatives accelerated mainstream acceptance of the view that recreational sports activities make up a significant element of student life separate from intercollegiate athletics or physical education.

In 1994, the NIRSA executive committee adopted a position paper that called for the independent administration of collegiate recreational sports programs (Bryant, Anderson, and Dunn 1994). The paper made the case that there are significant differences between recreational sports programs, physical education departments, and intercollegiate athletics programs. While they each provide a unique—and possibly complementary—service to a university community, they are not synonymous. Services provided by recreational sports programs are broad and, because they offer accommodations for those with disabilities, enable all individuals to participate. The paper noted, "It is clear that attention must be given to the inherent differences between recreational sports, physical education and intercollegiate athletics when making decisions concerning the administrative structure for operating these programs" (Bryant, Anderson, and Dunn 1994, p. 4).

Since then, independent administration of collegiate recreational sports has expanded. In 1992, NIRSA estimated that 61 percent of all collegiate recreational sports programs reported to student affairs (Bryant, Anderson, and Dunn 1994); in 2007, that number had increased to 75 percent (Haines 2007). The organizational alignment of recreational

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sports programs with student affairs incorporates student learning and development into the administrative structure of recreational sports, further enhancing the overall educational experience.

In 2005, NIRSA became a charter member of the Student Affairs in Higher Education Consortium (SAHEC), advocating that collegiate recreational sports programs should (1) fully engage on their respective campuses as key players in student life, (2) adhere to principles that connect their activities and programs with student learning and learning outcomes, and (3) recognize that the learning enterprise is not the exclusive domain of academic units.

NIRSA collaborated with six other student affairs-related associations to publish *Learning Reconsidered 2: A Practical Guide to Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Keeling 2006), which presents “how-to” information on a variety of topics, including mapping the learning environment; developing learning outcomes; assessing internal environments; integrating learning into strategic planning; and aligning structure, resources, and priorities with accountability for student outcomes. The underlying premise of *Learning Reconsidered 2* is the understanding that higher education has a role in the development of the whole student and, most importantly,

Figure 3 **Marquette University Women’s Volleyball Club**



Marquette University women’s volleyball club won the 2008 NIRSA National Campus Championship Series volleyball championship.
Photo courtesy of ClubVolleyballPhotos.com

that student development always occurs in the active context of students' lives (Keeling 2006). Since its publication, *Learning Reconsidered 2* has been a topic of many professional development programs and workshops and student affairs- and recreational sports-related presentations, including those focused on determining whether campus activities, initiatives, or learning opportunities warrant the use of learning outcomes in the planning process and, if so, assessing whether intended learning outcomes have been achieved.

CAS Standards for Outstanding Collegiate Recreational Sports Programs

In 2007, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) endorsed some rather compelling revised and updated standards and guidelines for recreational sports programs. The new standards and guidelines, which specifically address the 14 CAS general standards, should make most parents (and students, if they are paying attention) feel good about the high level of service and quality expected in the planning and execution of collegiate recreational sports programs. When it comes to the human element, the standards are quite comprehensive, although the facility-related standards remain intentionally broad. The standards codify expectations for the thoughtful and intentional delivery of meaningful services to students and put the burden on colleges and universities to make that happen. They set high expectations for university support, engagement in student development and learning outside the classroom, and service excellence. Standards specific to student learning and development outcomes include effective communication, healthy behavior, enhanced self-esteem, collaboration, appreciating diversity, meaningful interpersonal relationships, satisfying and productive lifestyles, intellectual growth, social responsibility, personal and educational goals, realistic self-appraisal, clarified values, independence, career choices, and spiritual awareness (NIRSA 2007b). As a parent of a college-bound high school student, who's to argue?

Student Learning and Collegiate Sport Clubs

It is a pretty good bet that most college-bound seniors don't expect to play a varsity intercollegiate sport. So, do they leave their athleticism behind with their high school letter jacket? Not if athleticism was a meaningful part of

their high school experience, which helps explain the rising appeal of collegiate sport clubs for many students.

Listed within CAS standards as one of the possible recreational sports program delivery formats, collegiate sport clubs provide opportunities for individuals to organize around a common interest within or beyond the institution (Dean 2006). Clubs are a key element of most recreational sports programs and appear to be on the rise at many colleges and universities (NIRSA, forthcoming). They enable college students to participate in their sport of choice at varying levels of competition and skill and without long-term commitment or significant distraction from academic pursuits.

According to data collected for the *2009 Recreational Sports Directory*, more than 80 different club sports are offered across America's college campuses (NIRSA, forthcoming). In all, some 10,588 clubs are active at NIRSA-member institutions. NIRSA estimates that for every varsity athlete, there are more than four non-varsity college students who participate in sport clubs, like those shown in figure 3.

Although intramural sports have more participants and may be the most widely recognized collegiate recreational sports activity, sport clubs offer additional opportunities for student learning and leadership development, largely because clubs are student organized and led. A study regarding learning outcomes resulting from collegiate volleyball sport club participation found that club participants made gains in life skills, acceptance and appreciation of diversity, social interaction, communication, character, leadership, and beliefs about themselves (Haines 2008). Club participants demonstrated the greatest gains in travel planning skills, school pride, a sense of belonging, and overall leadership development. They were also significantly more engaged than the standard college student population with on- and off-campus groups, more skilled at communicating with faculty members, and more able to provide leadership for a club or organization.

Recruitment and Retention

Immediately following her junior year of high school, my daughter participated in a weeklong residential summer program for kids interested in science and engineering at Oregon State University in Corvallis. This hands-on program provided superb fun and learning, enough so that my daughter thinks she wants to be an engineer. When she

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returned home, it wasn't just the classroom teaching she told me about—it was also the fabulous Dixon Recreation Center, where the 50 or so summer program participants spent time after class and in the evenings. The Dixon Center had recently undergone a \$20 million expansion and remodeling project, and I must admit it looks pretty darn sweet. "Dad," she said, "we need to add a really cool recreation center to the list of things I want in a college." I was pleased and not surprised.

There is significant value inherent in campus recreation opportunities geared to the general student population.

An article in *Business Officer* made the case that while big-school athletics departments strive to be self-supporting (and some even contribute back to academic programs), there is significant value inherent in campus recreation opportunities geared to the general student population. This includes recruitment of students in the first place: "While not the deciding factor, fitness-related facilities clearly place in the pro-and-con matrix students develop when comparing institutions" (Hignite 2006, p. 30).

Figure 4 **Georgia Southern University Recreation Activity Center**



A comprehensive and visually appealing recreation center, such as the one pictured here at Georgia Southern University, can positively impact student recruitment and retention.
Photo courtesy of Hastings & Chivetta Architects/Sam Fentress Photography

Lindsey and Sessoms' (2006) assessment of the impact of campus recreational sports programs and facilities (like the facility shown in figure 4) on student recruitment and retention at a small southeastern university found that 31 percent of student respondents reported that the availability of recreational sports was important/very important in deciding to attend the college. In addition, 37.3 percent of respondents reported that the availability of recreational sports was important/very important in deciding to continue at the college. Further, 83 percent of respondents indicated that they participate in some form of recreational sports each week, while a whopping 93 percent said that they would like to participate in recreational sports each week.

A study conducted by APPA's (Leadership in Educational Facilities) Center for Facilities Research (Cain and Reynolds 2006a, 2006b) reported findings similar to Lindsey and Sessoms (2006). The APPA study found that one-third (32.9 percent) of potential student applicants said it was important to see an institution's recreational facilities. The study also found that some potential applicants rejected a campus because it lacked a student recreation facility (29.3 percent) or had an inadequate (26.1 percent) or poorly maintained (16.6 percent) student recreation facility.

James O'Neill (2006) wrote in the *Dallas Morning News* about the newly constructed \$25 million Dedman Center for Lifetime Sports, Southern Methodist University's latest effort to keep pace with colleges across the country as they spend millions on amenities to enhance the student experience. According to O'Neill, "The trend is fueled by the intense competition among colleges trying to attract students who are in high demand, as well as a cultural shift among the students, who expect college to provide a certain quality of life" (2006, unpaginated Web source).

Construction Boom Times

What does "keeping up with the Joneses" mean to a college or university now that it is widely held within higher education circles and supported by research findings that handsome and high-quality recreational sports facilities add to the draw of campus life? Is there really intense competition to build compelling recreational sports facilities among colleges trying to attract students in high demand? It sure seems so, and recent data bear this out.

According to a 2008 NIRSA survey, the construction of new and renovated campus recreational sports facilities

continues unabated. Survey results report almost \$4 billion in campus recreational sports facility construction either under way or planned at 174 colleges and universities between 2008 and 2013. (This figure does not include any of the hundreds of new facilities that have opened within the past few years.) The 2008–2013 projects include 96 new construction, 62 expansion, and 62 renovation projects projected to serve an estimated 2.5 million enrolled students. The average project cost is \$20,772,536, and the average project size is 89,061 square feet (NIRSA 2008b).

The wave of collegiate recreational sports facility construction that began in earnest in the 1980s raised both athletic participation and student expectations. However, a recent survey found that many of these new facilities were not correctly sized to serve the needs of their campuses; while handsome, many were simply too small—or too popular. The survey, conducted for NIRSA (2008c) by the National Research Institute for College Recreational Sports & Wellness at Ohio State University, gathered data about the size and scope of existing collegiate recreation facilities and facility components to aid campus recreation facility planners in the planning and design of future recreational sports facilities. A unique element of the survey collected data about what experienced campus recreation directors felt they *should have* in terms of recreational facility space to meet the needs of their respective campus communities, not just what they do have. Based on this research, NIRSA published *Space Planning Guidelines for Campus Recreational Sport Facilities* (NIRSA 2008c), which offers facility guidelines that consider an institution's size (small, medium, large, or very large) and facility type (indoor facility, fitness facility, outdoor adventure recreation facility, aquatic facility, and outdoor facility and field). The combination of data about current and ideal space planning practices should help rightsize future construction projects well before ground is broken.

Students now expect college to provide a certain quality of life.

Ultimately, however, how extensive future facilities will be depends on a number of factors, including student enrollment, how closely recreational sports programs are aligned with student life, and whether facilities are dedicated

solely to student recreation or shared with other university departments, including athletics.

A Changing Demographic Landscape

Clearly, the face of higher education is changing. My daughter's freshman class will more likely have greater cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity than any preceding freshman class no matter what school she attends. Between 1980 and 2004, change in total fall enrollments measured solely by race/ethnicity found that white, nonHispanic enrollment fell by 15 percent, while black, nonHispanic enrollment grew by 4 percent, and Hispanic enrollment increased by 7 percent (Snyder, Tan, and Hoffman 2006). In the 2006–2007 academic year, the number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States increased by 3 percent to a total of 582,984, the first significant increase in total international student enrollments since 2001–2002. An even higher increase was reported in the number of new international students (those enrolled for the first time at a college or university); in 2006, those enrollments rose by 10 percent over the previous year (Institute of International Education 2007).

A recent study by the Council of Higher Education Management Associations (CHEMA) corroborates observations (O'Neill 2006) regarding a cultural shift among students, who now expect college to provide a certain quality of life (Goldstein 2006). The study interviewed 190 board members representing 22 different CHEMA-member organizations about future changes in higher education, drivers of change, and degree of readiness for change. Interviewees made two key predictions: (1) institutions must be prepared to respond to growing expectations for services and service quality, and (2) institutions must be prepared to meet expectations for 24-7 access to services.

The study also reported that higher education markets are growing more diverse and noted that "if institutions are to maintain their enrollments in the face of the predicted decline in the number of college-bound students [over the next 10 years], they must be able to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds. They must create a campus climate that is even more welcoming of diversity" (Goldstein 2006, p. 7). Thomas Dison, associate vice president at the University of Texas at Austin, acknowledged as much: "This generation of students will be more diverse, and a larger percentage will be first-generation college students" (Goldstein 2006, p. 7).

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CAS standards highlight the importance of accommodating diversity on campus. Specifically, standards call for recreational sports programs to (1) address the characteristics and needs of a diverse population when establishing and implementing policies and procedures, (2) nurture environments where commonalities and differences among people are recognized and honored, and (3) promote educational experiences that are characterized by open and continuous communication that deepens understanding of one's own identity, culture, and heritage, and that of others (Dean 2006).

A striking example of the type of change that a more diverse student body may bring to higher education in general, and to collegiate recreational sports programs in particular, surfaced at Harvard University in early 2008. Six Muslim coeds at Harvard petitioned the school to provide them with access to campus fitness facilities on a "women only" basis, allowing them and other Muslim women who typically cover their limbs and hair to follow their religious and cultural code to dress more suitably for exercising. On a trial basis, the school decided to restrict one of its three student fitness facilities to women only during what would otherwise be considered regular business hours, causing a furor among many segments of the student body, including both men and women (Associated Press 2008).

Building Buildings that Build Community

Making significant inroads to address demographic diversity may actually come easier to collegiate recreational sports programs than to other campus units, especially when this involves constructing new campus facilities or refurbishing old ones. Through the input of student advisory boards and the yearly assessment and evaluation of current program offerings, most recreational sports programs are clearly aware of their students' needs. In particular, sport clubs put the notion of accommodating individual and collective student needs in a league of their own, since by and large these clubs are student organized and led.

Following profession-wide consideration and deliberation, NIRSA adopted guidelines to assist in the planning of indoor and outdoor recreation-related facilities. Published by NIRSA and endorsed by the Society for College and University Planning, *Planning Principles for College and University Recreation Facilities* (Turman, Morrison, and Gonsoulin 2004) defined six planning principles to assist in creating and guiding the physical planning process for a

livable campus. Central themes include the responsibility to both address the diverse needs of students and the overall university community and to accommodate the specific programmatic needs and interests of various user groups, including students, faculty, and staff. The six planning principles include

- Establish recreation as one of the pillars of comprehensive campus planning.
- Create and maintain a vision for the physical development of recreation facilities, a vision that supports the mission and master plan of the institution.
- Develop a process for designing sustainability into the planning of new, remodeled, or renovated facilities (see figure 5 for an example of sustainable design elements).
- Instill a genuine sense of community and enrich the experience of all who come to the campus.
- Foster a safe, secure, and accessible environment.
- Ensure an inclusive and accountable implementation process. (Turman, Morrison, and Gonsoulin 2004, p. 2)

According to recent data, my daughter is not alone in wanting to participate in recreational sports activities when she goes to college. A national study by Kerr & Downs

Figure 5 **Sonoma State University Recreation Center**



Sustainable features incorporated into the recreation center shown here include a south-facing lobby, an absence of west-facing windows to prevent excess heat from entering the building, and overhangs that shade windows from the high summer sun but allow the low winter sun to enter.

Photo courtesy of Sonoma State University

Research found that, on campuses that offer them, 75 percent of students participate in recreational sports programs on a regular basis (NIRSA 2004). This equates to approximately 5.3 million students who are regular users of established programs and facilities. What's more, participation in recreational sports programs and activities was found to be a key determinant of college satisfaction, success, recruitment, and retention. The study also found that students who participate in recreational sports derive three major benefits from their involvement: improved overall emotional well-being, reduced stress coupled with an increased ability to handle workloads, and improved overall happiness. Recreational sports programs also build self-confidence and character, promote diversity, teach team building, and improve leadership skills. That's good news for students, university officials, and parents.

Participation in recreational sports is a key determinant of college satisfaction, success, recruitment, and retention.

It's a Small World After All

My daughter has been a fan of Disney theme parks and Disney movies since she first experienced Splash Mountain at Disneyland, or maybe it was Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. The Disney model of training, recognizing, and empowering employees ("cast members" in Disney vernacular) is replicated in many ways throughout the collegiate recreational sports profession. Walt Disney said, "You can dream, create, design, and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it requires people to make the dream a reality" (Disney Institute 2001, p. 74).

In 1913, responsibility for intramural activities at the University of Michigan and Ohio State University was vested in just one person at each school; today, there are some 20 different job titles for full-time campus recreational sports program staff, including the relatively new positions of athletic trainer; business manager; and coordinators for membership services, student development, and research and assessment. Although not every school with a campus recreational sports program employs someone in each position, many schools have hired several people to fill a particular job title in order to handle the workload associated with certain programs.

Recreational sports programs are also one of the largest employers of students at many schools. According to the 2007 NIRSA biennial salary survey, respondents employed an average of 170 students part-time to help serve an average enrollment of 13,756 (NIRSA 2007a). In addition, many campus recreational sports departments reported offering several graduate assistantships each year.

The diversity of student needs and the continuing expansion of campus recreational sports facilities, programs, and services have led to greater specialization within the field. There is also profound interest and active engagement in continuing education among professionals and students who work in campus recreational sports settings, as well as among university administrators. For example, the number of people attending NIRSA's National Recreation Facilities Institute has increased each year since 2004. Offered occasionally since 1991, the first institute had 47 participants; the latest institute had approximately 180 participants (including campus planners, architects, and administrators) and is now an annual event. Similarly, the National School of Recreational Sports Management (NSRSM), first established in 1989, began offering two levels of instruction in 2001 to meet heightened interest. To maintain the quality of instruction in the face of growing demand, enrollment caps were introduced in 2003. Now, enrollment at the NSRSM fills within one week, and a waiting list is maintained.

To better understand the increasing specialization within the field and respond to the growing desire among professionals for continuing education, NIRSA is creating the National Registry for Recreational Sports Professionals. Once established, this national registry, based on a widely accepted set of core knowledge areas in the recreational sports management field, will provide a structure for continuing education and for recognizing individuals who respond to their professional obligation to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high levels of service to customers and institutions. The registry will be flexible enough to serve the diverse developmental needs of current and future recreational sports managers. Regardless of how or when someone entered the profession, the registry will outline knowledge areas that support the profession, providing a framework for deciding which conferences/symposia to attend, courses to take, certifications to seek, and/or professional activities to engage in. This framework could help supervisors/mentors guide the development of subordinates/mentees, allow

conference/workshop program committees to select appropriate presentations, and enable educators to identify areas in which programs or courses need to be created (Barcelona 2004).

Conclusion

Randy Gragg, associate editor of *The Oregonian*, wrote that “Today, a university’s most important building is its student recreation center” and lamented that, given the importance of the project to the university and the city of Portland, Portland State University wasn’t spending enough money in building its new downtown campus recreation facility (Gragg 2007).

Although some may argue that a campus facility other than a student recreation center is a university’s “most important building,” the phenomenal continuing growth and expansion of campus recreation facilities and programs is widely recognized by both higher education and the public at large as having a significant impact on student success. The importance of having a bona fide campus recreational sports program in place is understood at all levels of higher education administration, whether its focus is to recruit and retain students, to complement academic missions while enhancing student life, or simply to foster and improve the health and wellness of the larger campus community. Today’s campus must have access to indoor and outdoor facilities in order to offer a comprehensive and compelling recreational sports program, it must employ highly skilled and motivated personnel, and it must offer a variety of programs and services that meet the diverse needs of students and the campus community as a whole.

As our family’s college road trip continues into the next stressful phase of applications and essays, we’ll keep our eye on the ball and make sure that every school my daughter applies to has a thriving recreational sports program positioned as an essential element of student life. And if a school were to ask me to write an essay about my favorite word as part of a college application process, the word I would choose is “amazing.” 🎉

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