

# Collegiate Recreational Sports: A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract

The role of recreational sports programs and facilities has become increasingly prominent on America's college and university campuses. Budgets, facilities and staff have all increased, almost exponentially in some cases, as institutions continue to direct resources into the programs and facilities that are often utilized by 60% or more of an institution's student population. But such prioritizing of resources has not always occurred on college and university campuses in the United States. This paper provides a brief, yet comprehensive history of the development of collegiate recreational sports in America.

## *Collegiate Recreational Sports: A Historical Perspective*

Programs of recreational sports in the United States play a more prominent role on college campuses than ever before; particularly as a means of enhancing the quality of life and as a complement to the academic experience a student receives at a particular institution (Delworth, Hanson, & Associates, 1989). Kovac and Beck (1997, p. 12) reported that "Recreational programs and facilities are accessed by the highest percentage of students than any other program identified in the Quality and Importance of Recreational Services survey." Recreational sports programs have become increasingly comprehensive and the leadership and management of such programs correspondingly complex.

Recreational sports programs also have been said to enhance the student recruitment and retention efforts of colleges and universities. Maas asserted "it appears that higher participation levels in recreational sports correlates positively with enhanced persistence in the university" (1999, p. 15). The pilot study of the Quality and Importance of Recreational Services conducted by the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association found that 30% of the students who responded in the study considered the availability of recreational facilities and programs "important" or "very important" in their decision to attend their chosen university (Holsberry and Kovac, 1991).

The importance of providing such programs and facilities on college campuses is increasingly evident. One of the most compelling statements regarding the accelerating growth in all facets of collegiate recreational sports programs was seen in a discussion on the future of recreational sports by Karabetsos (1991). In this seminal article, the author reiterated the notion that recreational sports programs would continue to play a vital role in higher education, particularly in the recruitment and retention of students. Citing several well known observers of higher education, Karabetsos (1991) indicated that not only did the 1980s experience a boom in the construction of collegiate recreation facilities, but that the 1990s and beyond would witness even more construction of such facilities. The commentary was indeed prophetic in that research conducted by the National Intramural-Recreational

Sports Association (2004) reported that in the years from 2000-2003, NIRSA member institutions spent \$6.6 billion on the new construction and renovation of indoor recreation facilities.

As a result, the way in which recreational sports programs are delivered on college campuses today is profoundly different than in the past. The question of how recreational sports departments evolved to their current state is one that fosters intense interest. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a brief, yet comprehensive history of the development, growth, and maturation of recreational sports programs on America's college campuses.

## *Earliest Programs*

The exact origins of recreational sports on college campuses are sketchy, but the first documented "intramural" activities occurred between the freshmen and sophomore classes at Princeton in 1857 when the baseball teams representing their levels competed in a game (Hyatt, 1977). A contest such as this one actually helped foster the growth of intercollegiate athletics as schools began to compete against each other, in similar fashion to the baseball contest, but in other sports. In fact, it was not long after the 1857 "intramural" baseball contest that the first intercollegiate football game, between Princeton and Rutgers, was held in 1869 (Rudolph, 1990). Physical education programs also began to receive more attention as colleges and universities recognized them as legitimate additions to the academic curricula (Siedentop, 2007). Intercollegiate athletics and physical education underwent parallel growth through the early part of the 20th century, so much so, in fact, that the recreation/athletic "needs of the masses of students were almost entirely neglected" (Mueller and Reznik, 1979, p. 13).

## *From Student to University Controlled*

The beginning of the 20th Century was the period in which student control of intramural programs was at its peak. Fraternities took over most of the leadership of intramurals due more to the permanency of their organizations. This formal control of campus recreation by students did not last much past 1915, however, due in large measure to the unwieldy growth sustained by the activities, and students' inability to manage programs effectively (Means 1963).

It was not until about 1915 that university leaders began to recognize the need for a more formal organization of recreation. Even as early as 1904 the President of Cornell University organized instruction in gymnastics for students who were not participating on the intercollegiate team. The gymnastic coach, in this example, provided instruction to the nonvarsity athletes at the same time the intercollegiate team practiced (Mueller and Reznik, 1979).

Also at this time "university administrators began to examine the situation on their campuses and worked toward faculty control of both interschool and intramural programs" (Colgate, 1978, p. 4). Beeman, Harding, and Humphrey (1974, p. 1) wrote that

not only did colleges begin to organize intramural departments at the turn of the century; they began to appoint “one person as the director.” In fact, the University of Michigan and Ohio State University in 1913 were among the first to appoint a faculty member to oversee intramural programs on their respective campuses (Colgate, 1978). Other institutions quickly followed suit as reported by Hyatt (1977, p. 1): “by 1916 over 140 educational institutions had established departments under the direction and supervision of single individuals”. This movement that witnessed control of recreational sports programs removed from the hands of students and entrusted to a professional person corresponded with a larger movement in student affairs/personnel that brought about an increase in specialized student services. This era was characterized by the development of a new level of institutional administration, and recreational sport administrator positions were part of this evolution (Delworth & Hanson, 1989, p. 26).

In 1916, Elmer Mitchell published the first textbook about intramurals titled *Intramural Athletics*, and three years later, under Mitchell’s direction, the University of Michigan opened the first indoor facility on a college campus devoted to intramurals and campus recreation pursuits. For these reasons, and for his enduring contributions to intramurals and the field of recreational sports in the United States, Mitchell is widely regarded to be the “father of intramurals.”

#### *Growth in the 1930s*

The 1930s produced an era of increased construction of gymnasiums on college campuses. This rather unusual circumstance was the direct result of the economic depression America was undergoing at the time. Hyatt (1977, p. 9) reported that “The depression-filled 1930’s brought about large increases in the number of recreation facilities constructed.” The Works Project Administration and other governmental agencies built many new gymnasiums and other sport facilities. Such construction was certainly a windfall for institutions of higher education and for their intramural programs in particular. According to one source, “The WPA constructed gymnasiums, swimming pools, auditoriums, ski facilities and stadiums. Many of these facilities still host high school and university sport events” (Siedentop, 2007, p. 49).

Other factors led to the 1930s being a period of great expansion for intramural/recreational sports programs on college campuses. The creation of the Federal Emergency Relief administration, which in 1933 provided financial aid to many students who worked in intramural programs, proved to be a boost for those programs. Also, leisure time was on the rise, not only because of the depression, but industrialization and automation produced a shorter workweek thereby creating more free time. According to Siedentop (2007) “spectator sport fared poorly during the depression because few could afford the price of admission. This precipitated a major shift to participatory sport mostly at the local level” (p. 49). Educational institutions saw the need to provide recreational activities for students as a partial means of preparing them for their roles in society (Colgate, 1978).

#### *Growth in the War Years*

World War I and World War II contributed greatly to the rise in interest among college students for programs of intramurals and

recreation. The first World War brought about increased emphasis on competitive recreational sports due to poor physical condition of the individuals who served. World War II had an influence on the increase in recreational sports activity for the same reason, and because of two other issues: (a) recreational sports were part of the physical training regimen of servicemen, and (b) when veterans returned from the war and enrolled in college, they wanted to continue their competitive sport participation. Most colleges and universities experienced exponential growth in recreational sports participation at the end of World War II, growth that paralleled the swelling enrollments on college campuses following the end of the war (Beeman, Harding, & Humphrey, 1974). Furthermore, the federal government provided another boost to both athletic and recreational sport participation on America’s college campus through the funding of the design and construction of several “memorial gyms”, facilities that served to honor and commemorate the service men and women of World War II.

#### *Professional Associations and the Baby-Boomers*

A number of professional associations sprang up around the country that recognized the importance of intramural/recreational activity, thereby enhancing the status of recreational sports. Acknowledgement from the American Physical Education Association in 1930, the College Physical Education Association in 1933, and the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation in 1938 helped solidify the place of recreational sports on the national level. Furthermore, in February 1950, the National Intramural Association was formed by an amalgamation of intramural directors who met at Dillard University in New Orleans. These directors, all of whom were from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, laid the groundwork for the association known today as the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (Colgate, 1978).

The growth in college enrollments continued to increase in the 1960s with the influx of the “war babies”. Facilities devoted to recreational sports also continued to be built on college campuses and were done so for the first time with fees that the students voted to charge themselves specifically for the purpose of building and operating such facilities (Colgate, 1978). This trend continued and quickly became the rule rather than the exception as noted in one 1973 study which stated that “Collegiate intramural facilities are primarily financed through student fee income” (Preo, 1973, p. 3).

#### *Further Change in Organization and Governance*

In the mid-1960s, a change occurred which would alter the course of both recreational sports programs and the people who led them. The existing governing bodies for men’s and women’s intercollegiate athletics programs met in Washington, D.C. and recommended that the intramural programs (as they were still referred to at the time) no longer report administratively to an academic physical education or recreation department, or intercollegiate athletics. Instead, the conference participants recommended that the intramural programs report “to an administrative officer at the Vice-president level” (Colgate, 1978, p. 7). This recommendation was made for a variety of reasons, but perhaps the most important reason was that intramural programs on college campuses were

maturing into viable, independent entities that needed a sustained separate identity from athletics, physical education, and recreation departments. It wasn't until several years later, however, that a group of highly respected recreational sports professionals, and the NIRSA, took a formal, definitive stand on this matter.

This milestone event in recreational sport administration occurred in 1994. Bryant, Anderson, and Dunn (1994) developed a white paper titled *Rationale for Independent Administration of Collegiate Recreational Sports Programs*, in which they argued that because of the different missions, program comparisons, staff selection, funding, use and need for facilities, and certain community benefits between physical education programs, intercollegiate athletics programs, and recreational sports programs, that the three areas should have "Separate but equal organizational structures..." (Bryant, Anderson, & Dunn, 1994, p. 4). The authors posited that recreational sports programs in particular had historically been "subservient or indistinguishable from the others" (p. 3), and that as a result, resources such as money and facilities placed "physical education and intercollegiate athletics requests ahead of recreational sports" (p. 3). This white paper, adopted by the NIRSA Board of Directors in October 1994, helped position recreational sports programs throughout the country as more equal players with physical education and intercollegiate athletics departments in the eyes of executive level university administrators. A trend which had its beginning in the 1960s, received a significant boost in 1994, continues even today as seen in such actions as placing recreational sports programs under divisions/departments of student affairs, reporting, in many cases, directly to the chief student affairs officer (Patchett, Haley, & Maas, 1997).

#### *Toward More Inclusive Programming*

Up until the late 1960s, and into the early 1970s, recreational sports programs consisted mainly of competitive team, dual, and individual sports. A look at the typical program of offerings from the mid-1930s to the early 1970s revealed few changes in the types of programs offered recreational sports participants (Nordly, 1937). Nordly (1937) surveyed the intramural athletics programs at 12 different colleges and found a total of 39 different activities. All of the activities were competitive team, dual, or individual events. Interestingly, nearly four decades later in one of the first inferential studies of recreational sports directors, Preo (1973) reported that most recreational sports programs still consisted of the competitive team, individual, and dual sports.

Another theme running through the intramural/recreational sports programs from their beginning up to the late 1960s, even in the early 1970s was that virtually all programming was for men students. Changes at some universities occurred prior to this time at places like Michigan State University and Kent State University. But even these, and the handful of other institutions that started programs for women, did not do so until the early 60s, or late 50s at best. This paralleled the rise of what Hyatt (1977, p. vii.) called the "new intramurals" which, he reported began "roughly in the late 1950's."

Colgate (1978) reported that this changed quickly because of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972. Recreational sports programs were arguably the fastest athletic system to respond to the changes mandated by Title IX. Women were, by

then, attending colleges and universities in greater numbers than ever before, and they came with the desire to have an active lifestyle to accompany their academic pursuits. Women participated in the traditional intramural program offerings, but also precipitated changes to the status quo. Programs which emphasized fitness and a holistic approach to well being were introduced into the recreational sports selection of activities.

The rise of aerobic conditioning activities was especially attractive to female students and became highly successful in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Variations on the early offerings make the aerobics programs at most colleges still highly popular today among female students. Women participants also were responsible, in large measure, for the inclusion in recreational sports programs of exercise machines such as stairsteppers, treadmills, stationery bikes, and the like, as well as selectorized or body part machines which isolate certain muscle groups during exercise. Such offerings have caused women's participation in today's recreational sports programs to increase dramatically over the last 30 years. Burke and Tennaro (1997, p. 43) testified to this monumental increase: "the idea that more females [are] engaged in sports than at any other period in American history suggests that at long last women have achieved equal opportunity in sport." Kimme wrote as early as 1977 that women "are a major force in intramural sports, and we are rapidly approaching equal status with men's intramural programs" (p. 41).

A further development occurred that mirrored the changing nature of collegiate recreational sport. As programs changed to meet the demands of a more diverse group of participants, the leadership of the National Intramural Association believed that the name of the national governing body needed to reflect the more inclusive, diverse, and wide range of offerings provided by member institutions. As a result, the association was renamed the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association in 1975.

A few years later, the NIRSA expanded its professional scope with the publication in 1977 of a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal called the *NIRSA Journal*. Its original purpose was to provide useful, timely research, how-to articles, and thought pieces that would appeal to practitioners. At first, very few empirically based articles appeared, and the editors found it difficult to maintain a four-issues-per-year pace. Today, the journal, now called the *Recreational Sports Journal* has two issues per year that includes a balance of both empirically based articles, and those with a more anecdotal, opinion, and how-to orientation.

Recreational sports programs have indeed embarked on a new era in the last 25 to years. Hyatt (1977, p. 10) devised a definition of the "new intramurals" that is as fitting today as it was visionary when he wrote it: "The new intramural sports comprise a comprehensive program of competitive and noncompetitive sports and recreational activities that *may* be conducted within the walls of the institution." The programs of the new era work well with intercollegiate athletics and departments of physical education, both traditional "rivals" of recreational sports programs for facilities, funding and personnel; especially since the modern recreational sports programs stand alone and provide programs that are not offered by either of the other two operations. Hyatt (1977, p. 10) further described the new and expanded recreational sports program:

These new intramurals are wider in scope, offer more activities, possess more highly trained leadership, and render more services than do the traditional programs. Likewise, their budget is a separate one based on the sports and recreational needs of the students and financed by the school as a separate budget item.

### *Recent Historical Developments*

In recent years, recreational sports programs have exploded on the collegiate scene. Holsberry and Kovac (1991, p.3) reported in a national survey conducted to measure student satisfaction with recreational sports programs that "Recreation programs and services constituted the highest level of use among student service opportunities". In this same study, the authors reported that 95% of the respondents indicated that they participated in some form of recreation each week, and that 40% participated four or more times per week. These numbers have a critical impact on recreational sports departments since students, faculty, and staff, and, in many cases, the community use recreation facilities and programs at the highest levels of participation in history.

Also in the last ten to fifteen years, many institutions increased student fees, often through referenda, in order to fund the construction and operation of campus recreation centers. A natural outgrowth of the proliferation of such centers was the expansion of departmental operating budgets and administrative staff. Recreational sports departments became more business-oriented in their operation (Milton, 2008). As these new facilities opened, operational expenses were more likely to come from student fees, and students indicated they were willing to pay for quality facilities and services. A definite trend in the implementation of user fees was observed, and faculty, staff, and community members were found to be willing to pay a substantial amount for memberships to recreational facilities and programs (Childress, 1996).

The recreational sport program of the late 20th and early 21st Century, on most campuses, is comprehensive and complex. Childress (1996) reported that budgets in selected programs increased over 25% during the period from 1989 to 1996. The size and comprehensiveness of both the indoor and outdoor facilities that must be managed have increased exponentially. The marketing of recreational sports programs has become big business (Green, Gonsoulin, & Nordin, 1997). The number of staff members in many recreational sports departments has expanded to meet the needs of a growing, increasingly diverse group of participants. In 1995, the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association reported that the recreational sports department with the greatest number of professional administrative staff was located in the western portion of the country and consisted of nineteen individuals (NIRSA, 1995). In a monumental example of the depth of change, currently The Ohio State University will add nearly 50 administrative staff members to its existing staff with the development and opening of both phases of the Recreation and Physical Activity Center (RPAC), the new benchmark collegiate recreational sport facility in the United States (Dunn, 2006).

Legal and liability concerns have created intricacies and nuances to a degree unknown to the recreational sports programs and directors of past eras (Norum, 1992). Furthermore, recreational sports leaders are called upon more and more to develop and implement risk management and emergency action plans in their

departments (McGregor, 1997). In fact, legal and liability issues are of such importance that the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association devoted an entire issue of its refereed journal to legal, liability, and risk management concerns in recreational sports (NIRSA, 1988).

One of the side effects of student fee-based facilities and programs is that recreational sports programs are increasingly required to be self-sufficient, auxiliary operations (Milton & Young, 1996), fostering an increased emphasis on entrepreneurship (Jinske, 1992), and fundraising (Steinbach, 2000). Additionally, recreational sports departments are service-oriented organizations striving to create environments that are customer/member oriented (McChesney, 1999).

Communication also has become increasingly important in the management of recreational sports programs. Erickson and Hernon (1996) discussed the importance of computer and electronic mail applications as a means for mass communication to highly segmented markets. Handel and Hall-Yanessa (1997) took the communication research to the next logical progression and reported on the importance of the worldwide web in communication between program administrators and participants, as well as the ability to develop "e-commerce," i.e., providing programs with the opportunity to conduct transactions online.

Recreational sports programs and personnel are held more accountable for programs, expenses, revenue generation, and the like more than ever, causing increase in attention to assessment processes. The development of recreation-oriented standards by the Council for the Advancement of Standards attests to this increased attention. Parsons (1990) suggested a structured assessment approach including budget documentation, long-range planning, assessing participants, more academic orientation, and consideration of public impact. Neilson (1994, p. 22) discussed the process of hiring and working with assessment consultants and stated that "interest in assessment has grown among directors of recreational sports programs because it is now common for university officials to require justification for a program's existence."

Recreational sports has always been a participation driven profession. A recent and needed emphasis has been placed on the study of participation in recreational sports. Lindsey and Sessoms (2006, p. 34) considered the frequency of participation across a variety of demographic variables, one which had particular interest was the finding that women were significantly more likely than men to participate in recreational activity one to three times and four to six times per week ( $\chi^2(1) = 23.27, \alpha = .01$ ). Watson, et al. (2006) considered participation in recreational sports programs (users vs. non-users) and reported, among other things, that users were at "higher stages along the transtheoretical model" (p. 9).

Recreational sport, as a profession, has placed considerable emphasis in the last 15-20 years on the development of individuals who are specifically educated and prepared for professional careers in the recreational sport field. In a seminal work on the topic of professional preparation, Jamieson (1980) analyzed the competencies of recreational sports personnel at selected institutions of higher education. Her findings indicated that different competencies and education were needed for entry level categories as compared to top-level administrators. Although not

a big surprise, her work nevertheless served another, perhaps more important purpose: it got executive level university administrators understanding the importance of competent recreational sport administrators, and it got recreational sport researchers involved in a new and important research direction. Since that time research on competency, professional standards, educational levels and the like, has proliferated in the recreational sport literature. Nicoletto (1992) found that professional preparation of recreational sport administrators has taken two directions, that which focuses on the employee and that which focuses on the employer. Ross (1990) contended that one of the most important and effective methods for preparing the recreational sports professional was through field experiences. Montgomery (1990) focused on experiential learning and the internship process in her research. Lamke (1990) suggested that the major influence on professional preparation of recreational sports administrators is the individual faculty members who teach recreational sports administration or management.

Recreational sport has suddenly become a major player in the arena of co-curricular education in higher education. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association was a co-participant in the compilation of *Learning Reconsidered II* (Keeling, 2006), the publication calling for a more deliberate approach on the part of non-academic departments in higher education to develop programs and activities that have direct impact on student education. NIRSA and the recreational sports field also has been closely involved with CHEMA.

Recreational sports programs continue to have a bright future. Issues that must be addressed are legal and liability concerns, aging facilities, program assessment and the impact of programs on student learning, strategic planning, and financial resources. A perusal of the scholarly publication of the recreational sports profession, *The Recreational Sports Journal* (NIRSA, 2006, p. 80) indicates that further study and concern centers on participation, economic impact of recreational facilities and programs, sponsorship and fund raising, to name a few.

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