


THE FUTURE OF FITNESS?





Wheaton recently dropped its physical education requirement, believing that students will gain lifelong fitness skills by choosing engaging workshops rather than forced courses. **Now the challenge is helping them choose.**

By Jayne M. Iafrate

When Muriel Sargent North '25 returned to campus for her 75th Reunion a couple years ago, she naturally answered the obligatory questions about Wheaton “then” and Wheaton “now.” Top on her list was talk of the swimming requirement. “We thought we couldn’t graduate until we passed a swim test,” North recalled. “Some girls practiced right until graduation!”

Wheaton loosened, then eventually dropped any swimming requirement in 1976. In March 2002 the college dropped the physical education requirement—currently two courses—altogether, as part of the faculty’s plan for a more flexible curriculum. Beginning with the Class of 2007, Wheaton students for the first time must chart their own path toward physical fitness.

“We don’t plan to stop teaching physical education,” explained Chad Yowell, executive director of athletics. “We want to teach lifelong sports. The question for us is: Can our students make the correct choice?”

That question—whether students are equipped to make healthy choices about their fitness—has no definitive answer, and Wheaton is not the only college in the country seeking answers. From the largest university systems to the smallest liberal arts colleges, higher education institutions are reducing or eliminating P.E. requirements, some to save money, some to reduce the number of credits required for graduation, and others to respond to the desires of students. Administrators are re-evaluating not only student interest in fitness programs, but also the college’s role in promoting the overall health and fitness of students.

Historically, the physical well-being of Wheaton students was regarded as “critically important from the day the seminary opened its doors,” according to Paul Helmreich, professor emeritus and college historian. The seminary in 1844 became the first educational institution in the nation to erect a freestanding gymnasium for students, and has remained at the forefront of



Students enjoy a wide range of recreational options at Wheaton, including the Fitness Center, courses and workshops, varsity teams, and club and intramural activities.

institutions that advocated physical fitness for students. Until 1922, students were required to take four years of “physical training.”

At Wheaton today, faculty and administrators believe that students should and will commit themselves to fitness activities without the pressure of meeting requirements, and they cited that belief as a rationale for rescinding the P.E. requirement. Students at Wheaton profess a strong interest in intercollegiate and intramural and club sports, the Fitness Center and yoga, nutrition and martial arts workshops on campus, according to Yowell and Deanna Grimm, professor of physical education. The reportedly high level of student interest in physical activities, combined with a department philosophy of offering fitness/lifetime sport skills development and the nearing retirement of Grimm—the college’s only remaining P.E. professor—convinced Yowell that dropping the requirement was the right thing to do.

However, Yowell acknowledges that the decision was not made without reservations. “We felt reasonably comfortable with the decision, but not totally comfortable,” Yowell said. “We’re in line with student interest on campus.”

Learning exactly the scope of student interests is difficult at best, as much of the data available is based on self-reported interests, not actual behavior. Seventy-five percent of incoming students this year reported an interest in varsity, intramural or club sports, and over the past three years senior surveys have revealed that approximately 62 percent of students report at least three hours of exercise and/or sports activity every week, the minimum recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta. Yowell noted steady participation in varsity sports during the last seven to eight years, as well as growing interest in intramurals and fitness.

“Our future plans tie into that 75 percent of students who are interested in athletics and fitness,” he said. “The other 25

percent aren’t interested—right or wrong. They were essentially spoon-fed two courses, they remain a question for us.”

In fact, the 25 percent figure may be only a starting place for understanding and shaping student fitness participation. Physical activity levels tend to drop as a person ages. For example, the CDC estimates that only 38 percent of young Americans between 18 and 21 are regularly physically active.

The college does not compile data on the exact number of students participating in organized or independent fitness activities on campus, and according to self-reported data from surveys, more than one-third of Wheaton students acknowledge that they exercise less often than medical experts believe they should. Participation in club and intramural sports varies from year to year, as these organizations must rely on strong student leadership to remain viable. Participation in independent fitness activities, such as regular workouts in the Fitness Center or non-credit attendance of fitness courses, is nearly impossible to measure.

Liz Rey, director of the Fitness Center, estimates that an average of 90 students sign in to use the center each day, but students and administrators who use the center regularly believe this estimate is low, as many users fail to sign in.

The Fitness Center is at the heart of the college’s plan to meet and perhaps increase reported student demand for exercise options. Yowell says the center must be expanded and its equipment must be upgraded. “It’s one of the most popular places on campus, a place where athletes and non-athletes can get fit,” he said. “We want to build a place to accommodate the great breadth of interest in fitness and hire full-time professionals to help students create tailored fitness programs.”

That same thinking fuels the college’s interest in replacing mandated P.E. courses with workshops in fitness topics requested by students. Recent courses in hip-hop dance, yoga and meditation have been very popular with students, and these courses/workshops require specialized instructors.





“The courses that most interest students today are ones most P.E. majors aren’t qualified to teach,” Yowell said. “We want to bring in instructors in response to student interest, and we’re working with the Student Government Association to determine where interest lies. For example, if enough students want to learn skiing, we’ll bring in a ski instructor.

“In addition, we’ve hired an intramurals director in response to high interest in these programs, and we hope to hire a recreation director. Clark [Wheaton’s home for intramurals] is packed every day, and we want to facilitate student participation. Another way we hope to do that is through the construction of an outdoor track and field, which will provide a “turfed infield” playing surface for many intramural groups and a track used by varsity and recreational runners.”

Barbara Brennessel, a professor of biology who teaches nutrition courses, believes this approach to student fitness is prudent. “Physical activity is very important for overall health, but I think P.E. classes are not the way to go in terms of promoting lifelong wellness practices. If the Athletics Department offers fun intramurals, outings, tournaments, exam stress-reliever activities, etc., they may convert more students to physical activity than a P.E. requirement did.”

Others on campus disagree with the decision to drop the requirement. Biology professor Ed Tong believes each student should spend a few hours per week doing exercise. “For those who tend to be physically inactive, this requirement would force them to do something physical, and get them away from their books, computers and television screens. Considering that the general American population is overweight, any exercise is better than no exercise.”

Tong’s concern about exercise and its relationship to obesity is one that plagues many educators and health professionals. Physical inactivity, combined with poor eating habits, results in an alarming set of circumstances for young adults today.

According to the CDC, 61 percent of American adults are overweight or obese, and researchers expect that number to increase. Guiding students toward healthy eating habits is no less difficult a challenge for college administrators than encouraging exercise.

“Students tell me they’re vegetarians until chicken fingers go on the menu,” said Mike Ross, general manager of dining services at Wheaton.

The most popular food in both campus dining halls is the ubiquitous French fry. Wheaton students consume more than 300 pounds of fries every day, Ross said. They also prefer pizza (about 75 every day), hamburgers (more than 300 pounds), chicken tenders (about 250 pounds) and the sauté line, where more than 500 students are served every day at Chase alone. For breakfast, students crave bagels and cereal; “Frosted Flakes and anything with marshmallows,” Ross added.

Wheaton, like most colleges and universities, regularly surveys students about their dining experiences on campus and responds with changes to the dining hall menus and policies. The last college survey, in 2001, revealed an interest among students in healthy food choices. They gave high marks to the selection of food and the ability to determine their own portion size. They also called for less oil in prepared foods and nutritional and ingredient labeling that would help them make good choices. Still, students seem to have a difficult time making healthy choices.

Ross and other dining hall managers are frustrated that healthy foods often are discarded at the end of the day. In both Chase and Emerson, half of all vegetarian entrées are thrown away and half of all salads taken are returned uneaten.

The college will continue to encourage healthy fitness choices—whether or not students respond to them—and administrators are optimistic about the college’s ability to instill in students a lifelong affinity for physical fitness.

“I’ll continue to advocate for the fitness of Wheaton students and the resources they need,” Yowell said. “Our coaches and instructors understand the liberal arts model; we are thinking about the entire student body. That’s what Division III is all about.”

