

Physical Education and Undergraduate Persistence

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Over the past three past years, the Physical Education & Recreation CAKE¹ team has been exploring the experiences of students who participate in Physical Education (PE) classes. The goal of these studies is to develop a deeper understanding of why students enroll in PE classes, how prior experience may play a role in class selection, satisfaction with PE classes, and what well-being and success outcomes result from PE class participation. As part of these studies, we:

- 1) computed the percentage of students who graduated with at least one PE credit during the 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 academic years, and
- 2) modeled second- and third-year return rates and four-year graduation rates among the 2015-16 cohort of first-time, fulltime undergraduate students as a function of taking vs. not taking at least one PE class during the first year, plus control variables.

Summary

On average, just under half (46%) of all students graduate with at least one PE credit (2016-17: 43%, 2017-18: 47%, 2018-19: 48%). Moreover, students who take a PE class their first year are more likely to persist toward graduation. We found that among students who started at the UO in Fall 2015, those who enrolled in at least one credit or noncredit PE class during their first year were more likely to reenroll at the UO in their second year and in their third year, and were more likely to graduate within four years, compared to students who did not enroll in any PE class during their first year. After controlling for whether students were first-generation college students, transfer students, or state

¹ CAKE = Community Assessment Knowledge Experts. CAKEs are department-embedded assessment teams in the Division of Student Life.

residents, as well as for students' race/ethnicity, the predicted second-year return rate for students who take a PE class their first year is 4 percentage points greater than that for students who do not take a PE class. The predicted third-year return rate for students who take a PE class their first year is 7 percentage points greater than that for students who do not take a PE class. The predicted four-year graduation rate for students who take a PE class their first year is 7 percentage points greater than that for students who do not take a PE class.

Connection to Previous Research and Suggestions for Future Research

Research conducted by the Office of Assessment and Research in the Division of Student Life has documented several important facts regarding UO undergraduate student wellness and success. Their [Student Wellbeing and Success Initiative](#) research program has demonstrated robust associations between various aspects of wellbeing, including several aspects of belongingness, and academic achievement and persistence outcomes, like GPA and retention. Additionally, they have discovered that the Student Rec Center is the number two location on campus where students feel like they belong ([Clark & Bou Malham, 2019](#)). The present study does not address the question of why students who participate in PE classes are more likely to reenroll at the UO in subsequent years. However, future research should investigate whether sense of belonging, or some other aspect of wellbeing, mediates the relationship between PE class participation and persistence.

Recommendations

- **Incorporate PE classes into the first-year student experience.** Not only is participation in PE classes positively related to persistence, but it also contributes to students' physical and mental wellness. Compulsory participation in a PE class for all students, development of a Wellness FIG including PE classes, or establishing a Wellness-oriented Academic Residential Community are all possible courses of action.
 - Based on these recommendations, the Thrive: Healthy Communities Academic Residential Community is launching its first cohort in fall 2020. With over 40 applicants, 33 have been selected to enroll and participate this upcoming year. The ARC is a collaboration between PE and Rec, Housing and several faculty across various departments. The ARC will include students enrolling in the biology course, The Neuroscience of Happiness taught by David McCormick (the Director of the Institute of Neuroscience on campus).
- **Increase institutional financial support to subsidize the cost of PE classes.** A current barrier to participation in PE classes is the additional fee students incur upon registration. Increased financial support from the university would increase accessibility to PE classes for all students.
 - Unfortunately, the PE course fee increased in winter 2020 from \$60 to \$68. In fall 2020 the PE course fee will be \$85. The fee increase is necessary to cover faculty wages and other personnel expenses. Prior to this change, the PE fee remained steady since the \$3 increase in 2011-12 (from \$57 to \$60).
- **Invest in investigating the ways PE and Recreation programming, as well as other Student Life programming, contribute to student wellness and success.** The Student Life Office of Assessment and Research produces high-quality, actionable information. However, the operation is small and overstretched. To continue growing our knowledge of student wellness,

engagement, and success, additional skilled personnel are needed. Securing funding for full-time staff and/or graduate employee salaries/stipends are recommended.

- Funding was secured in Winter term 2020 to hire an analyst, but almost simultaneously a hiring freeze was imposed, precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic.