An investigation of constraints and facilitators to African American college females’ recreational sport participation

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Chelladurai (1992) maintained that the promotion of physical activity is “a legitimate concern of sport management;” but as noted by Chalip (2006), despite health being a legitimating benefit of sport, sport is largely absent from many public health agendas. Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move obesity initiative has helped increase sports’ role in health promotion, and the First Lady has worked with the many sport organizations, such as the US Tennis Association, the US Olympic Committee, USA Cycling/USA BMX, US Paralympics, USA Soccer, USA Swimming, and US Volleyball, to help kids learn sports. The Surgeon General’s Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation also mentions sport in reference to creating healthy schools (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Similar to the foci of these initiatives, research on the determinants and health benefits of sport participation has primarily been conducted at the youth level. This is an important population to target, but youth targeted programs may have short-term effects as data supports a decline in healthy behaviors after the adolescence stage (Nelson, Story, Neumark-Sztainer & Lytle, 2008). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that during a 5-year period from adolescence to young adulthood, obesity incidence increased 12.7%, with an additional 9.4% of participants remaining obese (Gordon-Larsen, Adair, Nelson & Popkin, 2004). Hence despite being a key population, young adults are not a top priority for many health programs, initiatives or interventions. Sport and physical activity patterns during young adult years are likely to be important influencers on habitual physical activity during overall adult life, and consequently have significant implications for long-term health outcomes. After high school, young adults gain more independence and autonomy to make their own food and lifestyle choices; hence, more interventions targeted at this population is needed.

Lower physical activity levels and increased obesity rates have been found to be more prevalent among African American college females compared to White females (Horn et al., 2008; McArthur & Raedeke, 2009); and campus recreation participant data in many PWIs show a gross underutilization rate for students of color. Hence the goal of this research project was to help African American college females develop lifelong healthy nutrition and physical activity behaviors by utilizing campus recreation as a vehicle to reduce health disparity gaps. The first objective of this multistage research project was to identify constraints and facilitators to African American college females’ participation in campus recreation programs and identify key modifiable factors underlying unhealthy behaviors.

Constraints are factors that limit or inhibit people’s preference and participation in leisure activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Jackson, 1991). Intrapersonal constraints are individual characteristics, traits and beliefs that affect leisure preferences and participation. Whereas, interpersonal constraints are individuals or groups that influence other individuals’ preferences and their participation. Finally, structural constraints are social and physical institutions, organizations or belief systems that influence the formation of leisure preferences and enhance leisure participation (Crawford & Godbey). Raymore (2002) espoused the need to not only investigate constraints that may limit individuals’ leisure activities, but to also focus on resources that facilitate leisure participation. Facilitators to leisure were defined as “factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to enable or promote the formation of leisure preferences and to encourage or enhance participation” (p. 39). Using Crawford, Jackson and Godbey’s (1991) leisure constraint model, facilitators were similarly classified as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Raymore).

A qualitative research design was utilized to explore African American college females’ experiences of how physical and social factors impact their participation in recreational sports and exercise. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through student organizations targeted towards African American women. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 freshmen and sophomore women of African descent attending
a predominately white institution in the Midwestern United States.

A deductive content analysis was carried out on the transcribed data. First, three main categories (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural) and two subcategories (constraints and facilitators) were derived from Crawford, Jackson and Godbey’s (1991) leisure constraint model and Raymore’s (2002) facilitator model. All text was coded according to the predetermined categories. Finally, the contents of the categories were compared and contrasted in search for similarities and differences across all participants.

Living a healthier lifestyle was important to all of women except for one. They mentioned that living a healthier lifestyle is important to them because they are mainly concerned about illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension, which run in their families. Common constraints included time, not having participation partners, lack of motivation, and messing up their hair. Common facilitators included friends or a group working out at campus recreation, seeing positive changes in their physique, enjoyment from playing sports, guilt from unhealthy physical and nutritional choices, and having a competitive end goal.

Similar constraints and facilitators were found compared to extant literature on college students (e.g. Ebben & Brudzynski, 2008; Jones et al., 2010; Spivey & Hritz, 2013; Young, Ross & Barcelon, 2003); but interpersonal (e.g. participation partners) and intrapersonal (e.g. hair, lack of motivation) appear to be highly significant factors affecting African American college females from participating in sport or other recreational activities in campus recreation.

The findings of this study have implications for the design of educational and promotional campaigns targeted towards African American female college students. Campaigns emphasizing heart health over hair and support groups would facilitate a shift in health promoting attitudes. In conjunction with this recommendation, the S.I.S.T.E.R.S. program, a Sport Intervention with Support, Training, Education, Realization and Socializing, is advanced. A support system, sport training, nutrition and physical activity education, realization that change is needed, and social aspect of a sport intervention are advanced as key factors to help increase healthy lifestyle behaviors. It is important for this population to feel that they are not on a solo journey to live a healthier life. This program emphasizes that they can be part of a team that workouts and participates in sport together.