Qualitative Examination of International Graduate Student Experiences with Campus Recreation Services

Seonghun Lee, University of Louisville
Tyler Spencer, University of Louisville
Mary Hums, University of Louisville
Meera Alagaraja, University of Louisville

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International graduate students constitute an important subgroup in U.S. higher education (Institute of International Education, 2017), yet their involvement in the campus community differs from other students as they are often responsible for research and teaching, and may have family obligations all while living in a new country. One way these students connect to their university is through campus activities, including using campus recreation facilities/services. Despite strong enrollment numbers, international students’ campus recreation participation rates are relatively low compared to domestic students at U.S. universities (Park, Yoh, & Park, 2015; Yoh et al, 2008).

Prior empirical research suggests that participating in campus recreation activities provides physical, psychological, and social benefits (Forrester, 2014; Henchy, 2011). Despite these benefits, some groups of students including international students, do not take full advantage of campus recreation services (Milton & Patton, 2011). Usage rates of campus recreational facilities/services by graduate students and international students are significantly lower than for undergraduate students and domestic students (Henchy, 2013; Park, et al, 2015). Previous studies indicated factors preventing international student from participating in campus recreation or other campus social activities were lack of time due to work, school, or family; lack of workout partners; and lack of information on recreation services (Guo & Ross, 2014; Islam, 2017; Park, Yoh, & Park, 2015).

Crompton, Jackson, and Witt (2005) suggest that benefits and constraints simultaneously influence individuals making decisions on leisure participation. The purpose of the present study was to examine benefits of and barriers to participation in campus recreation facilities/services among international graduate students at U.S. higher education institutions. Crompton, Jackson, and Witt’s (2005) integrated model of constraints and benefits of campus recreation participation provided a theoretical framework for the researchers. Two research questions guided the current study: What barriers prevented international graduate students from using campus recreation facilities/services? What perceived benefits did international graduate students report from campus recreation participation? Using the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013), the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 international graduate students who utilized campus recreational services at a four-year major public university. Inductive coding techniques were used to analyze in-depth interview transcripts.

Three primary barriers to using campus recreational services emerged: lack of time, lack of transportation to get to the facility, and lack of information on facilities/services. Lack of time and lack of information coincided with the findings from previous studies (Guo & Ross, 2014; Islam, 2017; Park, Yoh, & Park, 2015). Participants reported three principle benefits from using campus recreational services: improved physical health, improved emotional well-being, and socialization with friends. These findings concurred with and in some cases extended Crompton, Jackson, and Witt’s (2005) work. Future research could compare the campus recreation experiences of international graduate students by gender or by home country. The results suggest campus recreation administrators offer programs and services to increase participation rates which would enrich the overall campus life experiences of international graduate students.