

Influence of Campus Recreation Facilities on Decision to Attend a Southeastern University: A Pilot Study

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University students have numerous reasons why they select one institution over another. With all the extracurricular activities offered, academics are no longer the only reason considered by students when selecting a university to attend. Recreation facilities are quickly becoming a strong element in recruitment for many institutions. In a pilot study, 64 freshmen students of a southeastern university were surveyed to measure the influence campus recreation facilities had on their decision to attend that specific university. Roughly 80% of participants reported being informed about student recreation facilities prior to enrollment, with more than half of the respondents reporting they were impressed or very impressed with facilities. More than one in every three students stated their decision to attend the university was based in part on positive perceptions of recreation facilities. More than half of the students influenced by recreation facilities in their decision to attend the university were shown campus recreation facilities during a pre-enrollment campus tour. Results from this study show that campus recreation facilities may be used to influence students' decision on which university to attend. Implications and practical applications of this study are discussed in the closing sections.

Key Words: recruitment, college choice, campus tours

Increasingly, universities are spending millions of dollars on student recreation facilities that are not just for athletes, but for all university students (Turman & Hendel, 2004; University of Northern Iowa, 2002). By building and renovating such facilities universities hope to attract potential students (Cahners Business Information, 1991; Turman & Hendel, 2004). One way in which institutions can use these state-of-the-art facilities in attracting students is through highlighting them during campus tours and recruitment campaigns (Lamont, 1991; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). One study conducted by Ohio State University reported that recreation facilities were second only to academics in regards to why students selected the university (Managhan, 1984). A complete understanding of if and how campus recreation facilities impact student recruitment is unclear (Turman & Hendel, 2004).

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to conduct a preliminary investigation of the influence of university recreation facilities on students' decisions to attend a particular university. Clemson University, located in Clemson, SC, with approximately 14,000 undergraduate students, was used as the study site. A secondary purpose was to assist in the development of a survey instrument to measure students' preferences for recreation facilities to be used in future studies.

Methods

A total of 45 "Freshman University Success" classes at the university were identified as the population from which a sample was drawn. Three of these classes were selected as the pilot study sample using a random numbers table (Babbie, 2002). Such classes were selected because they were comprised of freshmen and transfer students whose decision to attend the university was made most recently. Sixty-four participants completed questionnaires, representing 36 of the total 66 majors offered at the university. This sample size is adequate as Rea and Parker (1997) claim at least 50 participants are needed for a pilot study.

A questionnaire was administered by the researchers during a 15-min portion of the three separate "Freshman University Success" class sections. Uniform protocol (Dillman, 2000) was followed in administering the survey so that each of the three classes was addressed by the same researcher and received the same instrument and directions to minimize researcher bias. Questionnaires consisted of four sections: participation history, recreation facility influence, current use patterns, and demographics. Each section had 19 items including nominal, ordinal, and interval level questions. Sections were selected based on previous works conducted at three universities across the U.S. with undergraduate enrollments and recreation facilities comparable to the southeastern university (Gilbert, Shirkey, Beason, & Baller, 2004; Oklahoma City University Intramurals, 2004; University of West Florida Recreation and Sports Services, 2004). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 12 software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL) to yield frequencies and simple cross-tabulations on particular variables.

Results

Of those students surveyed ($n = 64$), 80% participated in athletics and/or some form of outdoor recreation during high school. Similarly, recreation was considered by four out of five students to be an important part of life. Approximately 80% of the students reported being informed about and impressed with the university's recreation facilities prior to attending. Most students reported they were informed about the recreation facilities through campus tours (35%), followed by talking with friends (24%), and brochures (19%). Of those students who were influenced by recreation facilities to attend the university, 52% said they were informed about university recreation facilities while participating in a pre-enrollment campus tour.

More than one-third of the students stated their decision to attend the university was based on their positive perceptions of recreation facilities. Of those who

indicated that indoor recreation facilities influenced their decision to attend, 46% of women reported the cardiovascular workout area to be the most influential, while 54% of men reported the weightlifting area or basketball courts to be most influential. Only women respondents chose the cardiovascular areas and indoor tennis center as influential and only men respondents chose the weightlifting areas and racquetball courts as influential (see Figure 1). Regarding outdoor facilities, 50% of women and 64% of men said that the intramural fields and the university golf course were most influential in their decision to attend the university. Only women respondents indicated volleyball areas as influential (see Figure 2).

Study Implications

Results from the pilot study suggest that several changes could be made in subsequent studies to gain better insight into the influence of recreation facilities on students’ decisions to attend a particular university. Suggested modifications involve the overall study process, as well as the structure of the instrument:

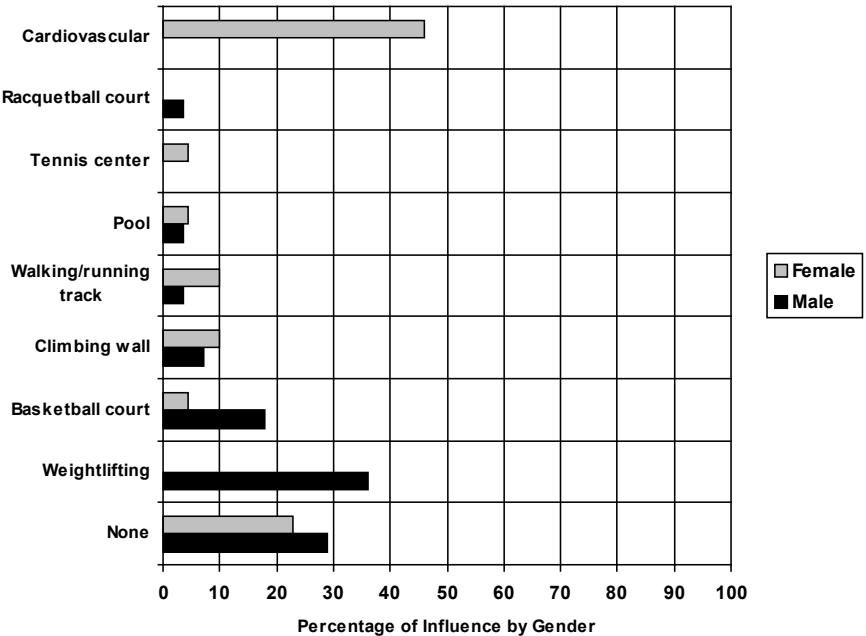


Figure 1 — Percentage of influence by gender of the students who stated indoor recreation facilities influenced their decision to attend.

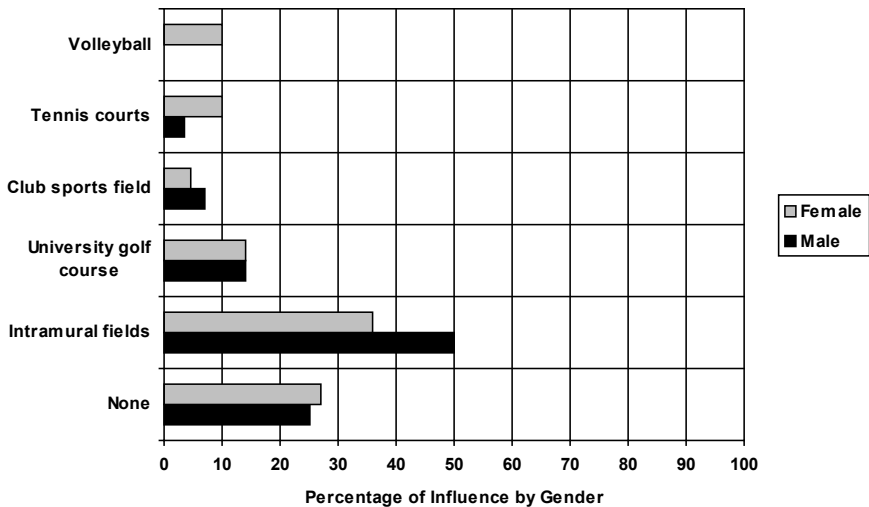


Figure 2 — Percentage of influence by gender of the students who stated outdoor recreation facilities influenced their decision to attend.

Overall Study Modifications

- To determine appropriate sample size for subsequent studies, reference should be made to Dillman (2000) where an appropriate sample size can be calculated based on population size and sampling error. For example, our population of freshmen and transfer students at the university is typically 4,000 per year. With a sampling error of $\pm 3\%$, our sample size in a non-pilot study should be roughly 850 students. If using a sampling error of $\pm 10\%$, the sample size would need to be approximately 100 students. To reduce the size of the sampling error, the sample size should be increased.
- A web-based survey may be a useful instrument for data collection in subsequent studies given the advanced computer skills of current university students. Commercial survey instruments can be fairly easy to construct with the assistance of web-based survey developing companies, such as SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com). Also, Dillman (2000) provides a step-by-step procedure for web-based survey design, implementation, and delivery.
- When using a web-based survey, a pre-notice email should be sent to all prospective respondents, providing a website for the survey. Systematic multiple contacts (via email) should also be used to maximize response rates (Dillman, 2000).

- Incentives may be used if survey response rates are a concern. For example, the sponsoring university department can provide free t-shirts or sports equipment for every n th participant selected to participate. Another incentive may involve a drawing for a recreational fee waiver for the semester. These bonuses may encourage a higher response rate, enticing some students who may not otherwise agree to participate.
- This type of study could be part of a comprehensive needs assessment for universities to conduct every 4 or 5 years to determine how influential student recreation facilities are in students' decisions to attend. Collecting such data may also help to explain how incoming students perceive the overall quality of student recreation facilities.
- It may be fruitful to focus on how recreation facilities influence specific types of undergraduate students. One population of students that could be beneficial to attract are National Merit Scholars or other highly sought-after students. Promoting recreation facilities during recruitment of this particular group of students has the potential to increase national recognition for the university if such students are influenced by facilities to attend.
- Students touring the university may also be asked what other institutions they are considering. This may be done through informal surveys of potential students either administered during a campus tour or shortly thereafter. Participants may be contacted 1 year later (using the addresses provided during the tour) to determine what university assets most influenced their decision. This information may be used to indicate how influential, either positively or negatively, recreation facilities were in students' decision to attend the university.

Instrument Structure Modifications

- A core question of the overall influence of recreation facilities should be included in addition to individual questions concerning availability, accessibility, attractiveness, and variety. In this pilot study, individual questions regarding availability, accessibility, attractiveness, and variety were collapsed into one variable (encompassing overall influence) when analyzing the data. By asking an overall question of whether recreation facilities influenced students' decision to attend, a more straightforward response may be provided.
- Primacy effect occurs when either the first or last response item is selected in "mark all that apply" questions to a larger extent than other items based on their location (Rea & Parker, 1997). To reduce this effect, the order of response items should be manipulated. This can be done in two ways. First, half of the questionnaires may have the order of response categories reversed (so as to compare with the other half). Also, response categories can appear in random order from one questionnaire to the next. In addition, these types of questions can be rewritten with nominal response categories, such as "yes/no" choices for each item should be considered. This may also decrease the primacy effect.
- A statement regarding "family currently attending/or attended university" should also be included as an option when asking how respondents were informed of university student recreation facilities. In the present study,

this question contained five response choices: campus tour, friend, website, brochure, and other (an open-ended response, where participants could fill in their additional response). In coding data prior to analysis, it was found that a number of individuals wrote in responses involving being informed by family members. This makes sense due to the high percentage of students who attend the university because of strong family traditions.

- A general question as to which type of facility was most influential, indoor versus outdoor, should also be included. In the present study, students were asked independent questions regarding indoor and outdoor facilities and which type had the greatest influence on their decision (see Figures 1 and 2).
- In recreation facilities studies, questions regarding other reasons to attend the university should also be asked, such as: academics, scenery, location, family tradition, and others. One limitation of this study was its narrow focus. Other reasons for attending the university were not included in the questionnaire. Asking a question that includes other reasons to attend the university (such as those listed above) may yield a better understanding of just how important recreation facilities are in relation to academics, scenery, location, family tradition, or other identified areas in influencing students' decisions to attend one institution over another.

Discussion and Application

There are a number of practical measures campus recreation departments can employ based on the results of this study. Consideration should be given to administering a survey to first year students every 4 to 5 years to determine how influential recreation facilities are in students' decision to attend the institution. Using this information, campus recreation departments may gain a better sense of changes and improvements that need to be made to appeal to potential students, as well as meet the needs of students once they arrive.

Information from this type of research may also be used by campus recreation departments when considering marketing strategies and promotional materials. If research results indicate students were not informed of campus recreation opportunities prior to enrolling, the campus recreation department should consider allocating more time and money to marketing efforts during the time most students are touring campus (e.g., summer vacations, school breaks).

Campus recreation departments should also consider presenting highly visible programs during prospective student tours. Such programs may include informational booths in facilities and around campus, as well as flyers and brochures handed out at key campus locations. Another marketing approach universities might implement to gain the interest of potential students would be to offer free access to recreation facilities during campus visits, and perhaps throughout the duration of their deliberation process. A free pass card (accompanying campus tour literature) could be mailed to prospective students prior to their visit. Further, during tours, campus recreation personnel should highlight recreation and the use of sports and recreation facilities as outlets for stress relief and a vehicle for a healthy lifestyle while on campus (Kanters, 2000). Campus recreation departments

should consider working in conjunction with other departments across campus, such as admissions, student affairs, or student development offices to strengthen the recruitment process.

Findings from the pilot study suggest student recreation facilities do influence students' decisions to attend a particular university. Further investigation into the study is warranted based on the implications noted above. Recruitment programs can be designed by universities highlighting the most influential aspects of student recreation facilities. Emphasizing student recreation facilities during campus tours should be an integral aspect of such recruitment programs.

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