

KWAN, MATTHEW

University of Toronto

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Transitioning Students' Sport and Physical Activity Participation

Project Summary

The transition from late adolescence to young adulthood represents a time of profound changes, including a period for which substantial declines in physical activity levels occur. As the late adolescent population transitions into early adulthood, a number of trajectories are possible (e.g., entry to the workplace, armed forces), but a large proportion of young adults elect to pursue a higher education at college or university. Recently, research has begun to examine the patterns of physical activity among students as they transition from high school into university. Consistently, the studies have found participation in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity being significantly higher during students' last year at high school compared to during their first-year at university. Anecdotally, substantial decreases in organized sport has been a significant contributor to those overall declines in physical activity participation; however, changes in sport participation during the transition from high school to university had not been previously examined.

Research Methods

Participants were 162 first-year students that completed a questionnaire during their spring semester at university. The questionnaire included a global (general) measure of physical activity (Godin Leisure-Time Exercise Questionnaire; Godin & Sheppard, 1985), a detailed measure of sport and physical activity behaviours (Modifiable Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents; MAQ-A; Aaron et al., 1995), and semi-structured open-ended questions to identify the perceived barriers to sport participation during students' first-year at university.

Research Results

Consistent with previous research, the study found participation in both vigorous and moderate type physical activities decreasing from high school to university. Among the participants, 63% of the students exhibited declines in their overall physical activity, 22% of the students showed an increase in their physical activity, while 15% did not change.

Average engagement in strenuous/vigorous physical activities decreased from 3.64 times/week during high school to 2.35 times/week during university.

Average engagement in moderate physical activity decreased from 3.61 times/week during high school to 3.01 times/week during university.

Together, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity declined from 7.26 times/week during high school to 5.36 times/week in first-year university.

The primary purpose of this study was to further examine the role of sport participation. The results found an overall decline in their participation in organized sports, similar to the declines in overall physical activity levels.

On average, students reported participating in a sport activity on 14 days/month during high school; entering university, students reported engaging in sports on an average of 5 days/month.

In addition decreases in the frequency of sport participation, there were decreases in the duration of those sport activities. On average, students engaged in 77 minutes/session during high school, and only 39 minutes/session at university.

Decreases in sport participation were moderately related to decreases in strenuous/vigorous type physical activity; and weak-to-moderately related to the decreases in moderate type physical activity.

With the many health and social benefits associated with being physical activity and sport, research should strive to understand populations such as first-year students and the reasons behind their decline in both their sport and physical activity levels. Students identified a number of important barriers to their sport participation during their first-year at university.

- Time constraints
- Availability of sports
- Fatigue
- Alternative social activities
- Laziness

Policy Implications

The present findings demonstrate significant linkages between declines in sport participation to the overall declines in physical activity behaviours among young adults transitioning into university. It must be recognized that the transition into early adulthood is a period for which individuals disengage from sport participation, continuing to become less active advancing with age. Given the many benefits associated regular participation in sport and physical activity, this transitional period offers a critical point to intervene

Next Steps

This study was able to provide a snapshot into the sport participation of students transitioning from high school to university. While providing some insights to first-year students' participation in sport-specific activities, there is a need for further research. First, more efforts is required to develop the capacity for sport and physical activity surveillance among the collegiate population (i.e., tracking sport participation over time). Secondly, qualitative studies may be necessary to gain a more in-depth understanding behind the contexts associated with declines in sport participation. Lastly, future research needs to continue to understand the key changes occurring during this transition period, and to develop a sustainable intervention to help students maintain their engagement in sports through this life change.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Broadly, the findings from this study will be informative to organizations and ministries associated with sport and health promotion (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport, Canadian School Sport

Federation). Furthermore, the findings could also be useful for physical activity educators – highlighting the needs for a greater emphasis on sustaining lifestyle sport and physical activities following high school graduation.