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Fitness, Friendship, and Fun: University Sponsored Community PE Program

by Wendi Wilcox Stanley, George Mario Paul De Marco, Lloyd L. Laubach, and Corinne M. Daprano

Note: Though the project reported in this article was initiated by a university program, it could just as easily have arisen from a school program. If your school is located in the vicinity of a physical education teacher education program, don't wait for them to make the first move. As this article suggests, there are benefits for students at both the elementary and college levels. And, that can only be good for physical education. —Editor

Originally founded by Fr. Leo Meyer of the Marianist Order of the Catholic Church in 1850, the University of Dayton has emerged as a leader in Catholic education both in the United States and abroad. Committed to a holistic, just, and caring education that produces distinctive graduates by linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service (De Marco, Ridenour, Laubach, & Morefield, 1999), the university is guided by the traditions passed down by the founder of the Marianists, Fr. William Joseph Chaminade. Based on a Marianist document titled the *Characteristics of Marianist Education* (Society of Mary, 1996), these traditions reflect the University's mission and are manifest across all departments and majors, including Health and Sport Science. Listed below are the characteristics of Marianist Education:

1. Educate for formation in faith.
2. Provide for an integral, quality education.
3. Educate in the family spirit.
4. Educate for service, justice, and peace.
5. Educate for adaptation and change.

Believing in the primacy of educating the body as well as the mind and the spirit, the founders embraced physical activity—specifically physical education—during the university's earliest beginnings. From an introductory chapter in their

Manual of Christian Pedagogy (1910), the following quote, powerfully illustrates their belief:

Although education bestows its principal cares upon the soul, yet the first cares refer to the wants of the body; because it is only through the body that the soul and its faculties can be reached, and through the body only that the soul can communicate with the outer world. We shall therefore consider in the first place, Physical Education. (p. 22)

Toward upholding the founder's commitment to physical education while responding to the potential epidemic in childhood obesity (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1996; National Center for Health Statistics, 2000), the University of Dayton Department of Health and Sport Science sponsored a community-based physical education program in the 2004 Fall semester that served more than 60 inner city elementary school students while providing service learning opportunities for all its first year Health and Sport Science students. In addition, the program, which provided a wellspring of quantitative and qualitative data, was guided by the practices and principles of service-bonded inquiry (Martinek, Hellison, & Walsh, 2004) that truly put research into practice.

The purpose of this article is to describe that program, called Fitness, Friendship, and Fun. It is only one of a series of community

based, physical education service learning programs. These programs are sponsored by the University of Dayton Health and Sport Science Department in collaboration with a neighboring professional development school, the Patterson-Kennedy (PK) Site Based Academy. The article will conclude with recommendations for teachers, practitioners, and university faculty seeking to implement community based programs that are both consistent with their mission and that promote physical education.

Fitness, Friendship, and Fun

The program, Fitness, Friendship, and Fun, was staffed by 65 first year student interns (UDSIs), four graduate assistants (GAs), and two university professors. The program began with 65 male and female elementary students, primarily from the fifth and sixth grades. The students were selected by teachers and staff at PK. Each student was required to have a signed informed consent from their parent(s)/guardian(s) to participate. Five students did not continue with the program due to trouble in school, withdrawal by their parents, or continual absences from school.

Students participated in a nine-week fitness-based physical activity program that met once a week. The program consisted of fifteen minutes of running/walking and fifteen minutes of fitness-related activities (push-ups, sit-ups, jump roping, stretching, sit-and-reach, step-ups, lunges, and bicep curls, tricep extensions, and seated row with a thera-band). The PK students were transported by bus to the University of Dayton and paired with a trained UDSI, with whom they worked out each session.

The program used several strategies to keep the activities fun. Music was played during each session. The UDSIs logged their PK partners' progress and provided constant positive feedback. They also allowed the PK partners to choose the order in which exercises were completed. The program capstone—and a positive incentive throughout—was students' participation in a special one-mile run/walk event sponsored by the Ohio River Road Runner's Club.

Program Outcomes and Discussion

Patterson-Kennedy Students: Selected Journal Entries

In addition to the exercise sessions, students were asked to complete guided journals, answering specific questions. The following are edited selections from PK students' journals.

1. Describe two activities you did today and how you felt after your workout?



I ran a lot but it was worth it. And I did a lot of sit-ups and push ups. And I jump roped. It felt good to exercise . . . We ran and stretched today. It was fun. I cannot wait until next week on Monday to come to UD again.

2. Why are these workouts good for you?

The workouts are good for me because you will get healthier . . . I think those workouts are good for me because I get stronger, and better at them. For example if I do 5 push-ups last Monday, this Monday I'll try to do more like 10 . . . I think Fitness and Friendship workout at UD is good for me because I need to get a lot of strength, build bones, and so we won't gain weight.

3. Why do you think the UD student is working with you? Describe your thoughts about your UD partner.

I think they're working with us because this is a friendship workout and it's a new friend to have . . . I think my UD partner is working out with me to keep me healthy, strong, and happy . . . Because it is a fun program to exercise.

4. Describe the changes you are starting to see in yourself.

The changes I'm seeing in my self are that I play more and have more energy. I can also see I am losing weight and I'm proud of myself. I am starting to have more self-confidence. Before I went to UD I could only walk 1 mile, now I can run a mile. I like to exercise more than I did before.

5. How prepared are you for tomorrow's one mile run/walk race, and how do you think you will feel during the race?

It will be lots of exercise and running. During the race, I think I will feel self-confident for the most part . . . I think that I will do good. I will love it. I am very excited to do this with my UD partner.



University of Dayton Student Interns: Perspectives and Perceptions

The Fitness, Friendship, and Fun program also provided transformative experiences for the UDSIs. Their interactions with the PK students were guided by the *Characteristics of Marianist Education* (Society of Mary, 1996). Reflected in their journal entries are the following, which were written at the conclusion of the program.

1. Formation in the Faith

Far too many of these youngsters see no other solution to survival but to follow others' examples and follow the path that leads toward a dark future. I know these things because my student told me about them first hand and helped to show me the real meaning of this program. The stories he told me made me thank the Lord above for what I had and in turn ask God to help guide this child. The fact that he could put himself above all the destruction and pessimism is very, very inspiring

2. Integral and Quality Education

This is something that I thought I would not have to do when I came to the University of Dayton, but now I understand that this university is not only about educating you for the field you are going into, but it is also about helping the surrounding community. I value and cherish this experience greatly and am delighted that I was able to participate in such a great and awesome program.

3. Family Spirit

Not only did we get to work with the kids, we learned about The University of Dayton's family spirit and all they do to help out the students. We had the opportunity to work with the kids and encourage them to exercise. We didn't only help them and teach them to exercise, we also built a strong friendship . . . and we still write letters to each other after the class is over.

4. Service, Justice, and Peace

After working with Steve these last few months and



6. How did your UD partner help you during the race, and how did you feel about yourself after the race?

I felt good but wore out after the race. My UD partner helped me by telling me, good job, keep up the work . . .

My UD partner told me not to give up and encouraged me during the race. I felt so happy and proud of myself because I ran a whole mile

7. Describe any future dreams you might have to run/walk in other races?

In the future I want to walk the Boston Marathon. I think that would be nice to do . . . I would love to run 2 miles. It would be great. It would be fun . . . I would be so happy to do another race again . . . When I get older I want to be a famous runner.

(Note: All 53 PK students who participated in the one-mile walk/run completed the distance with an average time of 10:59).

8. Describe how you feel today about fitness, and what you will do the rest of the year to stay healthy and fit?

The rest of the year I will do everything I do at UD. I feel great, stronger, getting muscles and my stomach is getting tight. What I will do to stay fit and healthy is eat my vegetables and fruit, drink lots of water, stop eating so much candy, work out, and play. I will exercise all day, ride my bike . . . I feel fitness is about losing weight and having fun. I feel that fitness is fun healthy and helpful.

9. What are your thoughts about the UD program?

I liked everything at the UD program. There was nothing I did not like . . . I felt it was a cool program. It was very fun . . . I think that they should have it for middle school next year . . . I think the UD program is great. It was perfect. And I got a chance to get in the best program. And I got to meet a lot of UD students.

learning the lessons I have learned, I am very grateful that we were able to do this service to the Dayton community. Not only did we serve them, but they definitely served us in return. This experience made me feel as though I was really making a difference. I think that this class was a great way to put the University's motto, "Learn, Lead, Serve" into action. Though I enjoyed working with my PK Student and believe I helped him, I believed he helped me more.

5. Adaptation and Change

The positive lifestyle changes that our class has encouraged in the Patterson Kennedy students will hopefully foster changes in their daily routine that would directly influence their lives later on. In the case of my individual student, I was able to have her open up to me through exercise, and I believe she positively influenced me as a teacher and friend. Although these may be small steps toward correcting the overall problem of childhood obesity that has become prevalent in our nation, it does however make a small step in the right direction. I also recognized a change in myself. . . . I began to open up to the things that I have been blocked from before

Discussion and Recommendations

The Fitness, Friendship, and Fun program had many benefits for both the PK students and UDSIs. Evaluation of the program outcomes indicated improvements in students' self-confidence, enjoyment, attitude toward physical activity, and openness to new relationships with their peers and UDSIs. Based on our experience with this version of *Fitness, Friendship, and Fun*, we suggest the following for anyone seeking to provide a similar program.

- Align the fitness program with your institutional mission. A successful collaboration between a university and local schools will cultivate service, mentorship, and community among students, enhancing their overall educational experience.
- If possible, extend the length of the fitness program. Meeting at least 30 minutes 2-3 times a week for an entire academic year would be the ultimate goal.
- Don't focus entirely on physical exercise. Include lifestyle education on nutrition and behavior.
- Don't limit assessment to the most popular fitness test batteries. Include multiple measures for each component of physical fitness. This makes it more likely students will discover individual strengths.
- The anticipation of participating in the capstone mile run/walk and sponsorship by the Ohio River Road Runner's Club provided a powerful incentive for both PK students and UDSIs throughout the semester. However, it needn't be limited to running; any similar special event, using a variety of lifetime

fitness activities, can provide the needed motivation and is highly recommended.

Successful school and university partnerships are neither easily developed nor maintained (Hellison et al., 2000). Challenges in the areas of staffing, funding, transportation, logistics, and scheduling—all of which are unique to the local area in which the partnership is to be formed—can pose daunting obstacles, but they are rarely insurmountable (see Acknowledgements). And, the outcomes arising from our own Fitness, Friendship, and Fun program demonstrate that such partnerships are well worth the effort.

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Detailed information on the UD *Fitness, Friendship, and Fun* program and original research related to it is available at: <http://soeap.udayton.edu/academic/hss/symposium.htm>.

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