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Trends in Collegiate Recreational Sports Facilities

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Abstract

This paper discusses trends in the construction and design of recreational sports facilities. Beginning in 1928, the Intramural Sports Building on the campus of the University of Michigan set the stage as a facility that was dedicated solely to recreational sports. While the number of gymnasiums and physical education facilities grew following World War II and into the 1960s, social and cultural influences in the 1970s significantly shaped the landscape for recreational sports on college campuses. In the past 25 years, innovation and demand have driven the size and character of these facilities. Many new and renovated facilities have integrated important campus functions such as academics, health, wellness, and sport. These recreational sports facilities also contain unique features such as climbing walls, rooftop playing fields, food service, counseling centers, convenience stores, and campus police stations.

Trends in Collegiate Recreational Sports Facilities

Ever since Amherst College defeated Williams College in the first intercollegiate baseball game, in 1859, sports facilities on college campuses have been an integral part of the campus landscape (Greenberg, 2004). Ten years later, in 1869, the first intercollegiate football game was played between Rutgers and Princeton universities, on the Rutgers campus in New Brunswick, New Jersey (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006); 22 years later, in 1891, Dr. James Naismith invented the game of basketball, at the YMCA Training School (now Springfield College) in Springfield, Massachusetts (Cohn, 1991).

The earliest example of a facility dedicated to recreational sports is the construction of the Intramural Sports Building on the campus of the University of Michigan. The facility was completed in 1928 at a cost of \$743,000, the brainchild of Elmer Mitchell, the "father of intramurals." The original facility contained 13 squash courts and 14 handball courts. Arguably, Mitchell set the tone for the first trend in recreational sports facilities with such features as a moveable wall separating the swimming pool from the gymnastics area. It was Mitchell's dream that the facility be one "where a thousand students can enter daily to congregate, and to mix their exercise with sociability" (Stevenson, Reznick, & Pitcher, 1978). Little did Mitchell know that his dream would come true, not only on the Michigan campus but on almost every other campus in the United States.

While the number of gymnasiums and physical education facilities continued to grow following World War II and into the 1960s, social and cultural influences in the 1970s significantly impacted the landscape for recreational sports on college campuses. With the advent of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, commonly referred to as Title IX, many more women were participating in college recreation and using recreational sports facilities. On many college campuses, furthermore, physical education was no longer a required part of the curriculum. As a result, many physical education facilities were being used for recreation and intramural sports. As the demand grew for recreation, the trend on college campuses was to build centers that were primarily designated

for recreation, with little space being given to intercollegiate athletics. The model for operation was similar to that of a business model, where full-time staff trained in recreation management were hired to direct facilities. Under this new model, memberships were sold not only to faculty and staff, but also to the outside community, according to the director of one university recreational sports division (W. Canning, personal communication, March 4, 2008).

Today, growth of recreational sports facilities continues. The average project expenditure to build such a facility is currently \$19.4 million, an increase of \$5.2 million from 2004. During the next 5 years, it is estimated that 400 indoor and over 300 outdoor recreational facilities will be built or renovated, representing an estimated \$4.9 billion investment (Goldman, 2007a). Over the past decade, colleges across the country have spent billions of dollars constructing recreation facilities to maintain their competitiveness in the higher education marketplace. In fact, the 2002 Kerr Downs Research Report found that institutions that were members of the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) had invested \$11.69 billion from 1995 to 2000 and \$7.12 billion since 2000 in new and renovated recreation facilities. This represents 91 million sq ft of indoor space (Turman et al., 2005).

Trend: Renovation of Older Facilities

The 1928 University of Michigan Intramural Sports Building has undergone a significant renovation, as have a number of older facilities on established campuses. In the original facility on the Michigan campus, there were two floors of lockers, each having 1,500 lockers. These days most of the school's recreation participants change clothes in their residence halls and don't use locker rooms: In recent times, the highest number of lockers actually rented was 300 men's and 150 women's (most locker usage was by runners). The University of Michigan decided to renovate both locker rooms and keep only 400 lockers for men and 200 lockers for women. Today the former locker area is a two-story fitness facility (W. Canning, personal communication, March 4, 2008).

The University of Pennsylvania encountered a dilemma when the institution decided to add new recreational facilities. It had to decide whether to renovate Gimble Gym (built in 1962 and containing three basketball courts, a weight room, a swimming pool, and locker rooms) or to demolish it and start over. The former option was chosen and the result was a \$21 million, 102,000 sq ft project known as the David Pottruck Health and Fitness Center. The net result was 67,000 sq ft of new recreation and fitness space as well as a juice bar. An urban location prompted designers of the center to maximize vertical space, employing five levels. The facility's exterior utilizes German-manufactured terra-cotta, a first in the United States, which has resulted in better insulation and lower maintenance costs (Suttell, 2003).

Recreation Hall at Pennsylvania State University served for decades as the home of many indoor varsity sports programs. Penn State was awarded the grand prize in the 2007 Education Design Showcase Awards for a renovation that transformed the hall into the Recreation Hall Wrestling and Student Fitness Center. The new facility covers 48,000 sq ft and was constructed at a cost of \$17 million. It has been cited for its club-like atmosphere and at the same time is a high-caliber competitive wrestling facility ("2007 Education Design Showcase," 2007, p. E1-E3).

Renovating sports facilities can be a political challenge. When Harvard University proposed renovating Hemenway Gymnasium into a state-of-the-art fitness facility, the institution encountered unexpected opposition from the Cambridge Historical Commission. During the design phase the architect, Sasaki and Associates, rendered over 20 renovation schemes and there were four visits by the historical commission before approval was received. The major point of contention was the building's windows. Sasaki was required to add three windows to the gymnasium's facade but only after supplying details such as the number of glass panes per window and the size of the window's mullions (Cohen, 2007a).

Similarly, the University of Texas planned to renovate Gregory Gym, a 1930s-era facility. The plan was to create an interior “street” between the original facility and an addition built in the 1960s. The project was eventually approved, but not until the Texas Historical Commission’s wish for larger entry areas and the replication of the original steel-casement crank windows was granted (Cohen, 2007a).

Trend: Innovations

It appears that eating establishments such as juice bars and cafés within collegiate recreational facilities are a trend that has emerged in recent years. A 1,700-sq-ft bistro and juice bar was incorporated in a \$54 million recreation center opened in 2006 on the campus of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV). Other features are a spa, two swimming pools, and a 5,000-sq-ft fitness area. The total square footage of the facility is 184,000 (Illia, 2006). Rider University, located in New Jersey, opened its Student Recreation Center in 2005. Similar to UNLV’s facility, the Student Recreation Center building includes a café, and it also features a formal lobby with seating and a flat-screen television wall. There are in addition a fitness center, an elevated running track, a game room, and three multiuse courts. The new facility, which is connected to an older alumni gymnasium, was constructed in two phases and provides 63,000 sq ft of new and updated space. The Student Recreation Center was named a Project of Distinction in the 2007 Education Showcase Awards and cost \$10.8 million to build (“2007 Education Design Showcase,” 2007, p. E20).

Another new collegiate recreation facility that includes food service is Fairmont State University’s Student Activities Center. Located in West Virginia, this 145,000-sq-ft facility opened in December 2004 at a cost of \$22 million. Food service comprises a student dining hall with a market-style food court that accommodates 600 students. In addition to serving as a recreation center, the facility is the institution’s student union. Included are a conference center, computer labs and classrooms, a convenience store, a photocopy and mail center, the campus bookstore, a student lounge, a coffee shop, and the campus police department. The Student Activities Center is attached to the university’s renovated main arena, which now houses the department of student life (“Architectural Showcase,” 2007, p. 96).

At the University of Connecticut, undergraduate enrollment has soared from 11,365 in 1995 to 16,347 today, consigning students in search of recreation to an overcrowded gymnasium built in 1951. Yet it appears that anticipated new recreational facilities for students are falling victim to other campus needs. For instance, while the \$2.3 billion UConn 2000 construction program set aside \$31 million for “intramural, recreational and intercollegiate facilities” (Goldman, 2007b, p. 18), the university spent that money toward the \$48 million Burton Family Football Complex and the Shenkman Training Center. The university’s president said that, while he supported the proposed recreational facility, his priorities were academics and the hiring of nearly 200 more faculty members. If and when the recreation facility is built, plans call for it to include not only basketball courts and cardiovascular training facilities but a juice bar, bowling alley, and aquatic center with a kayak wave pool and water slides (Goldman, 2007).

Trend: Climbing Walls

Climbing walls are a popular trend in recreational sport facilities today. Increasingly at universities there are climbing clubs, competitive intercollegiate climbing leagues, and elective classes that incorporate the sport of rock climbing (“Universities: The Changing Look,” 2008). At the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) last year a \$12 million, 52,280-sq-ft facility was opened, built with funds from student fees. In addition to the unique offering of a pottery studio, the UCSB facility includes a 15-ft climbing wall (Cohen, 2007b, p. 61). In Michigan, Alma College’s Stone Recreation Center has a 30-ft tall, 600-sq-ft climbing wall where, for an annual fee of \$10, students and members of the facility may train and, once certified, may climb whenever the wall is open. The wall features 10 belay stations and lead climbing

routes. The Alma College Climbing Club conducts children's climbing classes as a way to raise money for the club ("Climbing Wall and Club," n.d.). In 2006 Hamilton College, in New York, opened its climbing wall at the Charlene and Wayland Blood Fitness Center. Hamilton's wall is 3,000 sq ft and offers top rope and lead climbing, as well as a bouldering area. The wall is open to students and community members; children 8 and older are allowed to climb ("Climbing Wall," n.d.).

Oberlin College in Ohio dedicated a climbing wall and bouldering cave in 2003, housed in Phillips Physical Education Center. The wall—a pillar with four sides—is 25 ft tall and has seven anchors for top roping. On the steepest side are quick-draws for two or more lead climbing routes. The wall is described as having "over 1,000 holds of all shapes and sizes" with routes "set often to challenge both rookies and experienced climbers alike" ("Climbing Wall," n.d., ¶4). Oberlin College students are not charged to use the wall; other climbers pay \$10 per year, the funds used to purchase replacement ropes, climbing shoes, harnesses, holds, and other gear ("Climbing Wall," n.d., ¶8).

The \$25.5 million RecPlex at the University of Dayton was named a Project of Distinction in the 2007 Educational Showcase Awards ("2007 Education Design Showcase," 2007, p. E25). The facility includes 130,000 sq ft and is being paid for through a student fee, approved in a fee referendum. The RecPlex replaced a 30-year-old recreational facility that comprised only 5,000 sq ft. It contains a suspended running track, climbing wall, lounge and juice bar, classrooms, and outdoor sand-volleyball area ("2007 Education Design Showcase," 2007, p. E25).

Trend: Rooftop Facilities

Another trend in collegiate recreational facilities is the placement of playing fields on top of structures. In 1981, Brown University in Rhode Island built the first rooftop field found on a college campus. Named Warner Roof, the site was designed as a field hockey pitch atop Olney Athletic Center. More recently the University of California, Berkeley developed Underhill Field on top of a four-story, seismically safe parking garage at the center of the campus. Underhill Field has an infill turf system, and 25-ft nets and a chain link fence enclose the perimeter. Also included are spectator areas, restrooms, equipment storage rooms, and a sidewalk plaza (Cohen, 2007a). Rhode Island's Providence College constructed a field that is partially on grade and partially below grade. The facility, which primarily houses the college's lacrosse and field hockey programs, has won engineering awards for overcoming the drainage challenges that occurred in matching the two elevations. In Canada, the University of Alberta renovated a 20-year-old playing field placing 80% of the turf on the roof of a parking structure, the remaining 20% on grade. The old field had featured a glued-down carpet, which eventually wrinkled and presented problems as the building settled. The new surface is a sand-filled, loose-laid turf installed over a premanufactured pad (Cohen, 2007a).

Trend: Integrating Academics and Sport

There is also a trend to combine in single facilities both academics and sport; the combination has been both theoretical and pragmatic. At Haverford College in Pennsylvania, for example, President Thomas Tritton envisioned integrating athletics with the arts. The facility proposed to house the integrative program became one of the first recreational buildings to meet standards of the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System. The multipurpose facility has space for the college's programs in squash, basketball, martial arts, and dance. In addition, it includes displays of athletics-related paintings by students (Ezarik, 2006). Kenyon College in Ohio recently completed a \$60 million facility covering 265,000 sq ft. Both varsity athletic teams and recreational participants use the facility. While the building is equipped with a 50-m swimming pool, weight room, field house, and racquet courts, a theater, film library, and study lounges were also part of its design ("Architectural Showcase," 2007, p. 55).

The Ohio State University Recreation and Physical Activity Center, opened in 2007, consists of 568,380 sq ft and cost \$117.6 million. The facility is funded by a combination of state funds and student fees. Because of the immensity of the project, it was designed to look like several smaller structures so that it would fit the scale of surrounding campus structures. The facility has numerous gymnasias, two swimming pools, racquet courts, and a fitness area. Serving the University's student, faculty, and staff population of over 75,000, the facility contains some unique features such as a child care room, wellness center, juice bar, game room, and café ("Architectural Showcase," 2007, p. 58).

Trend: Integrating Health and Wellness

Another trend—evidenced, for example, at the Joseph E. Gallo Recreation and Wellness Center on the campus of the University of California, Merced—is to combine sport and health care. The facility is located between the academic core of the campus and the residential area. On the second floor of the facility, the H. Rajender Reddy Student Health Center can be found. The health center's philosophy is that "wellness encompasses an individual's social, physical, emotional, career, intellectual, environmental, and spiritual health" (Student Health Services, 2008). It serves as the physical "home" of wellness and works with other campus departments and faculty to offer a range of wellness activities, from peer health counseling for students, to nutrition programs, to massage therapy, to whitewater rafting excursions (Student Health Services, 2008). Butler University, in Indiana, also integrates sport with the concept of wellness. Its Health and Recreation Complex, which opened in September 2006, cost \$14.5 million and contains 83,000 sq ft of space. In a unique fashion, both student health services and counseling services are housed in the facility. Another unique feature is a multipurpose room adjoining the swimming pool and having a synthetic floor, to allow for a wet classroom or a party room ("Architectural Showcase," 2007, p. 70).

Long Island University in New York opened its Wellness, Recreation and Athletic Center in February 2008. This facility uses rooftop space to provide two all-weather tennis courts and a running track. The 100,000-sq-ft facility, which cost \$28 million, has a number of other unique features. Among them are a 15,000-sq-ft wellness center integrated with the university's health science program. The wellness center includes rehabilitation areas for treatment of asthma, cardiorespiratory conditions, and sickle-cell anemia, along with a hydrotherapy pool. All of these play a role in the institution's teaching practicum with a major New York City hospital ("Architectural Showcase," 2007, p. 132). Cleveland State University's Recreation Center, opened in August 2006, cost slightly more, at \$29.8 million, than did the Long Island University facility. It consists of 130,000 sq ft of space. In the design of the facility, the institution sought to achieve LEED certification. As a result, a number of unique features were included, such as storm water management to reduce runoff, use of native plant materials, and waterless urinals and other water-saving devices. Specifications for construction of the facility also included locally manufactured materials with recycled content ("Architectural Showcase," 2007, p. 79).

Conclusion

Many changes have influenced college recreational facilities over the past few decades. Changes in demographics, curriculum, and cultural attitudes towards fitness have significantly affected recreational sports facilities. For example, on college campuses today, almost 60% of students are female (Marklein, 2005). This factor has significantly impacted recreational programming, facility design, and facility renovation. No longer are there weight rooms; rather, there are fitness areas with an emphasis on cardio equipment and a limited amount of free weights. Also, there are fewer traditional gyms providing little except courts used primarily for basketball. Large spaces are now dedicated to wide-open social areas that are used for general fitness. For example, in the University of Texas recreation center, a three-story atrium was built with "spines" filled with cardio equipment geared for females (W. Canning, personal communication, March 4, 2008). Because the college population has become increasingly female, collegiate recreational facilities will increasingly cater to

the programming needs of women.

As described earlier, Pennsylvania State University was recognized for establishing a club-like atmosphere. This is just one expectation of today's students. Students also expect that technology will be a part of their fitness experience on the college campus, just like the fitness experience that they might enjoy at health clubs. For instance, many institutions make available (across their full line of cardio equipment) customized entertainment options, such as personal viewing screens for treadmills, bikes, and ellipticals ("Take Your School's Fitness Center," 2006).

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification is a trend that will continue, given the popularity of "green" building. Institutions are discovering the cost benefit of environmentally friendly features: how such features can be attractive, help the environment, and save money as well.

It appears that wellness is a strong trend, with a number of new facilities incorporating health services and counseling services, as well as rehabilitation services. The comprehensive offerings of traditional student unions, such as food service, post offices, and convenience stores, also have begun to be regular features of campus recreational facilities.

It is also evident that institutions are strongly considering renovation of existing facilities, especially in urban areas where property is at a premium. Efficiently using space by, for instance, placing playing areas on rooftops is a trend that this author expects will continue. In addition, funding of recreational facilities will continue to be supported by student fees. At private institutions, student fees have been an integral part of funding facilities for many years; today, even state institutions have begun to assess student fees for recreational and fitness facilities.

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