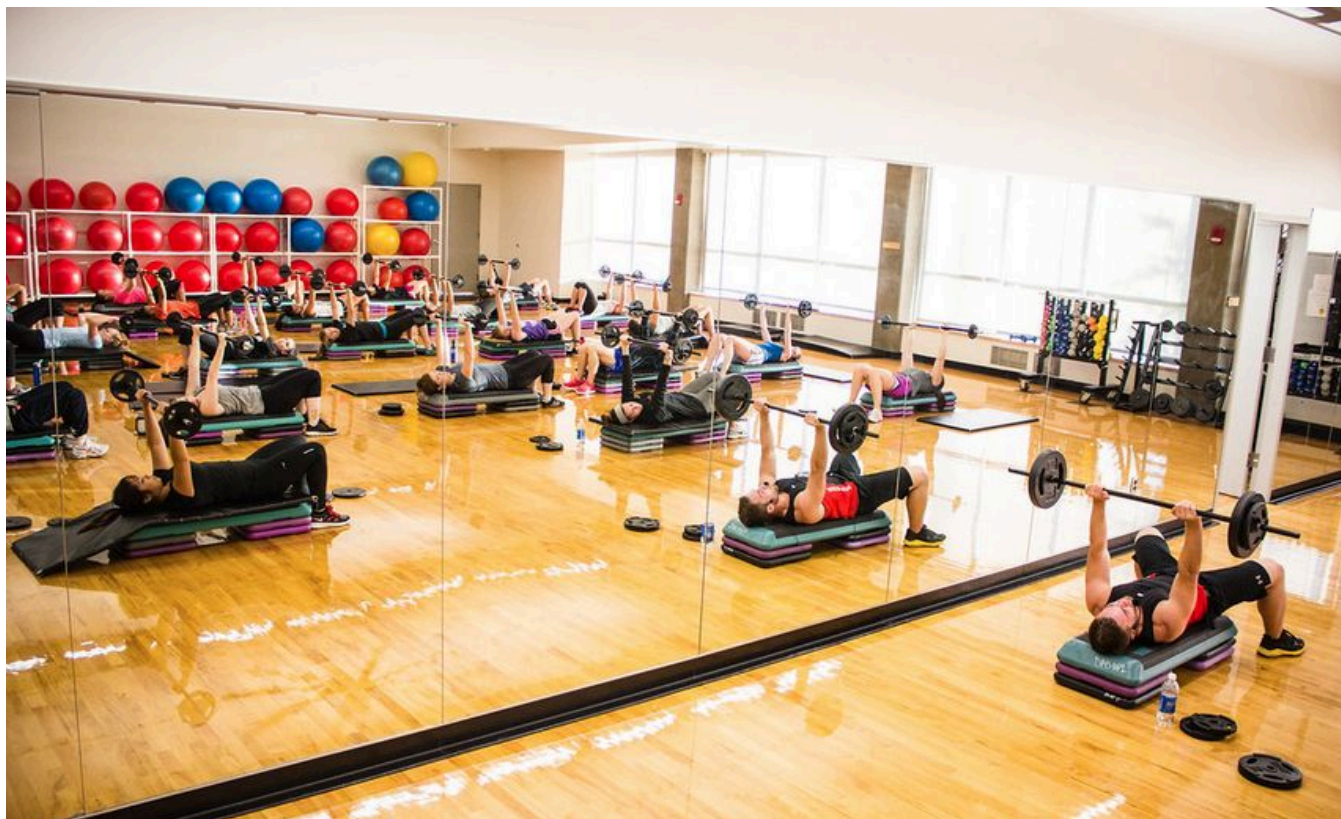


Changing Society: Declining physical ed classes

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A new study from Oregon State University finds that about 32% of colleges and universities in the U.S. require some form of physical education course to graduate, down from 39% as observed in an OSU study from 2010.

The continuing decline in required PE courses comes at a time when children and youth in the U.S. are also engaging in less and less physical activity, according to the Physical Activity Alliance's 2022 Report Card, which bases its rubric on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines.

"There's an enormous amount of scientific evidence supporting the value of physical activity. It's good for the human body, good for students — it helps them be better learners, better prepared; it increases cognitive functioning and helps with stress management," said study co-author Brad Cardinal, a professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences.

However, he said, there is no universal standard for what should be required in terms of physical education courses in colleges and universities.

“Longitudinal studies have shown that when someone attends an institution with a physical activity education graduation requirement, they tend to be healthier long-term,” Cardinal said, citing research from his lab and other research from the 1980s to the 2000s.

More recently, he said, researchers at George Washington University, the National Cancer Institute and the American College Health Association found that college and university students attending institutions with PE graduation requirements were more likely to meet the national physical activity guidelines.

“Removing the requirement is such a counterintuitive idea,” Cardinal said. “It definitely does not represent an evidence-based best practice.”

Without requirements in place, Cardinal said, his research has found that on-campus PE offerings are more likely to engage students who are already physically active or comfortable in gyms and sport-related settings. This leaves out students who might benefit from learning how to use such spaces and become comfortable in them for the first time during early adulthood, he said.

The study looked at a representative sample of 331 colleges and universities from around the country and documented whether they fully or partially required completion of a PE course to graduate. Partial requirements included schools where only certain degree programs had a PE requirement, or where students could choose from a menu of options that included physical education among other health-related courses such as financial literacy or sexual health.

Researchers defined PE as “any activity or academic course pertaining to health, wellness, sports or physical activity,” and included “conceptual” PE courses that emphasize teaching health behavior strategies to maintain lifelong physical activity lifestyles.

They found that 56.2% of institutions did not require PE; 31.7% fully required all undergraduates to complete a PE course to graduate; and 12.1% had a partial requirement.

The most common requirements mandated students complete both an activity-based and a conceptual-based course or a conceptual-only course. Private institutions were roughly twice as likely as public institutions to fully require PE courses, and institutions in the south were most likely to fully require PE out of any geographic region.

The study did not specifically examine disability access or accommodations for PE requirements.

Cardinal said several factors are likely motivating colleges to move away from PE requirements: Students have a lot of other courses they’re required to take for graduation, and there is a prevailing assumption that most learn basic physical education in their K-12 years, making it less necessary at the college level.

But the current numbers from K-12 schools show that isn’t the case, he said. According to the 2022 Report Card, the U.S. gets a D- grade with only 21% of U.S. children and youth ages 6-17 meeting the physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

That drops significantly within the older age bracket: 42% of 6-11-year-olds hit the target, but only 15% of 12-17-year-olds are getting their daily hour.

“The argument that physical education is something they’ve been taught, that they already know this before college — it’s just not happening,” Cardinal said. “The culture has shifted to where physical activity continues to be stripped out of daily life.”

Lead author on the study was Alexandra Szarabajko, a recent doctoral graduate from OSU who is now the department chair of exercise science at Columbia College in South Carolina.

Molly Rosbach works at the OSU Department of Marketing and Research. She may be reached at molly.rosbach@oregonstate.edu.