6-1-2011

The Presidential Perspective: Achieving Total Campus Buy-In American College of Sports Medicine

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn
Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn/82

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WMU President John Dunn by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
Good morning. I'm happy to be here talking on a topic about which I care deeply. I also find myself continuously incredulous that the idea of regular exercise as a means to a better life and yes, higher academic achievement, is still something that always sounds like a fresh idea.

Nevertheless, I give high marks to ACSM for its initiative—Exercise is Medicine.

I'm a university president. There are some critical personal and professional reasons why I care about exercise and why I spend time and invest personal and institutional capital to promote it. It is important to secure buy-in from our entire campus community--today more than ever.

I'll outline some of those reasons in a moment, but first, let's return to what I just said and ask ourselves what has prevented this concept from finding its rightful place in our nation's conventional wisdom.

Exercise for total well-being is not a new idea. Through antiquity the realization that exercise improves health and mental acuity has been described. In the century before Christ, Roman orator and statesman Cicero once noted "It is exercise alone that supports the spirits, and keeps the mind in vigor."

And less than a century later another Roman author and lawyer, Pliny the Younger, noted:
"It is remarkable how ones wits are sharpened by physical exercise."

(Slide #3)

Here we are 2,000 years later. Contrast those two statements from ancient Romans with one from a modern American hero, Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon. Here's what he said when a news anchor asked him about jogging and his fitness regime.

"I believe that the Good Lord gave us a finite number of heartbeats and I'm damned if I'm going to use up mine running up and down a street."

And, of course, we have all heard the famous—I prefer infamous—quote from Robert M. Hutchins.

"Whenever I feel like exercise, I lie down until the feeling passes."

So you see, it's been an uneven path forward. Interest in exercise and physical fitness goes in waves--and wanes in waves as well. Over the centuries, we have adopted and rejected ideal body types and then adopted new ones again. We establish an expectation of what a fit person must look like, and then fail to realize that every person, regardless of shape or size, can benefit from exercise and a realistic level of fitness.

In recent years, we've had a cohort of students interested in and committed to exercise. Our campus fitness centers have been full and those centers have been a positive recruiting tool. But if recent studies about student fitness are any indication, we may be facing a wave of young people for whom inactivity--in school and after school--is an ingrained way of life. Add to that inactivity, an increasing level of stress among students, and I predict our ability to keep our
students healthy, focused and productive will require that we utilize every physical fitness toll in our toolbox.

**Fitness on campus**

As a University president, this all represents both a challenge and an opportunity. From my perspective--as an educator with an intensive background in physical education--our campus commitment to physical fitness must reflect buy-in from our faculty, staff and students. It must be a part of our institutional commitment. Why?

**(Slide #4)**

**First** and foremost, it is the right thing to do for our students. If our mission is to help our students reach their full potential, we know that their academic performance and success in the future will be enhanced by boosting their fitness level.

**Second,** it allows us to maximize the investment our students, families and the state make in our University. When our campus community is operating at its full potential, we are ensuring the maximum return on investment for everyone who plays a role in funding and equipping our campus with top-notch people.

**And finally,** campuswide physical fitness is a matter of self-interest--both our personal and financial self-interest. There are very real improvements to the bottom line for campuses that focus on exercise. For a campus like mine, that is self-insured, a physical fitness focus pays dividends by enhancing employee fitness and reducing health care costs.
I feel so strongly about building a healthy University, it has become a pillar of my presidency. I take my definition of "healthy" from the World Health Organization, which defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."--

This definition has stood the test of time because of its breadth and balance. Health is about living life to one’s fullest while respecting the nature of each person’s uniqueness. Good health is a quest; a conscious effort each and every day to maintain balance and harmony in our physical, mental and emotional well being--or in the vernacular of the young, to be "in the zone."

(Slide #5)

What is a healthy university? Again, I want to use "health" in the broadest sense of the term. Our goal as a university community is good health in all its manifestations:

- Intellectual vigor
- Physical health
- Emotional and spiritual awareness
- Financial health and stability
- A healthy dose of self-esteem and confidence, and
- The ability to think beyond our individual and limited view to a larger perspective of the needs of our greater society--a world view, if you will.

That is what we are building together. We can be good stewards of the health of our university for the near term and for generations to come. Much if what we need to accomplish can be done by:
• Preserving our individual, institutional and natural resources;
• Preserving and enhancing our commitment to human capital--allowing the full development of the potential of every member of our community; and
• Committing ourselves to the fundamental principles that already are part of the mission and values we have defined as a university community. We have defined what a healthy organization looks like and we must adhere to those principles to achieve our goal.

(Slide #6)

**How to get there**

So how do we make sure our campus community buys into this proposition? What can a president do?

- Talk fitness constantly and try to lead by example
- Use every campus asset available to promote fitness.

By assets, I mean every experience, every facility and every student activity and campus tradition. I feel particularly blessed. The campus I have led for the past four years has an incredible fitness infrastructure and a staff willing to be innovative.

(Slide #7)

**Physical infrastructure in place at WMU**

Let me share with you the assets that come into play when we focus on fitness at Western Michigan University. Facilities include

- A 600-acre pedestrian campus with no through roads. It's ideal for running.
- A state-of-the-art student recreation center with climbing wall, indoor track, indoor pool and an impressive array of indoor courts and fitness equipment
- An athletic club to which every WMU employee has an automatic membership. Membership in the athletic club or membership in our recreation center is redeemable by employees as a taxable benefit.
- An ice rink and natatorium
- A West Michigan location that is surrounded by outdoor recreational facilities.

(Slide #8)

**Programmatic/operational fitness tools**

As I said, I consider our campus fortunate to have the physical facilities to do so much. But new initiatives and even old standbys offer an opportunity to inculcate physical fitness activities into campus life.

- Routine campus upgrades offer opportunities as well. A recent campus dining hall renovation enhanced a growing interest in healthy dining choices on campus. The renovated hall is a model for the addition of healthy dining options in other halls.

- Our commitment to sustainability is firm, and fitness becomes another feature of that commitment. Through exercise and fitness, we're sustaining our human resources and maximizing the energy and potential contribution of every member of our community.

- A recent fitness/wellness initiative involves our employees and the implementation of a personalized one-to-one fitness program. It is offered free of charge to all benefits eligible employees and its intent is to help employees take charge of their own physical and mental well being with the goal of improving
employee health, increasing productivity and reducing health care costs. Approximately 575 participants completed the first year by improving their waistlines, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, muscle tone and overall health habits.

(Slide #9)

**Campus traditions**

- Our campus traditions--new and old--now have a new fitness element or focus on fitness. These activities are far less costly than new facilities, but tremendously effective in communicating our campus commitment to physical activity.

  - Our freshman welcome activities now include Buster's Moonlight Stampede--an evening 3K run led by our campus mascot Buster Bronco. (Good place to insert about you telling a freshman that you were a student…)

  - About a decade ago, our annual Homecoming celebration began including a 5K run through campus early on Homecoming day. The Campus Classic is now an entrenched campus tradition that attracts alumni from as far away as California and hundreds of faculty, staff and students. Each year now, more than 1,500 runners enjoy our campus at its peak fall beauty.

  - For the past 15 years, we've turned finals week into a celebration of the fact that physical activity can help relieve stress and refocus the brain. Our Finals Finish turns our Student Recreation Center into one massive study break location staffed by volunteers from across campus. Students
snack, swim, do Karaoke, attend fitness classes, take scuba diving lessons and get massages. It has become as much a part of finals week as the exams themselves.

(Slide #10)

More work to do
Like all of you, we have much still to do to ensure we contribute nationally to the dialogue about exercise and fitness. But I think we are sufficiently aware of the concept that we now bring the idea to the table as part of every initiative.

We are engaged on our campus in the development of a new School of Medicine. We are doing so at a time when all the old curriculum models are being replaced with curricula that reflect the needs of medicine in the 21st century. That means we'll have the opportunity to ensure that future physicians have an understanding of the importance of exercise and the critical role it plays in prevention and treatment.

We also are seriously considering the step of becoming a smoke-free campus. As of April 1, there were about 500 campuses around the nation that have enacted such a policy, according to Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights. Our buildings have been smoke-free for some time now, but we know we can make a bigger impact on health by extending that no-smoke zone include our entire campus. Doing so would make us more consistent with our stated concerns for student and public health, by removing the harm caused by a Class-A carcinogen and a recognized toxic air contaminant for which there is no safe level of exposure.

(Slide #11)
That is both a practical step and a statement to our campus community that good health practices enhance the ability of educated people to reach their potential and make an impact on the world. We don't want them to be in the position of jazz great Eubie Blake. He enjoyed a long life--dying five days after his 100th birthday. Late in life, he famously said:

"If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

I'd like to see a population of students who leave our campuses expecting to live well and be productive well into their 90s--students who know how to take care of themselves. That's the Return on Investment we should be seeking for every new facility, program and initiative we launch.

(Slide #12)

Thank you for allowing me to share some of the pieces that work at Western Michigan University. I'd be happy to answer your questions.

(Approximately 17 minutes)