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Colleges focus on students' physical capabilities

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P-I REPORTER

Most nights after dinner, Kenny McCray heads to the gym with his dorm mates to lift weights, run on the treadmill and play racquetball.

"We're trying to stop the 'Freshman 15,' " he said of the weight students sometimes gain when they start college. "We're trying to go to the negative 'Freshman 15.' "

McCray is participating in a six-week fitness challenge at Seattle University that began last month. It's part of a broader effort to encourage students to adopt -- and maintain -- a healthy lifestyle.

Last summer, the university hired the holder of a master's degree in public health to oversee campus wellness. It recently began subsidizing the cost of personal-fitness assessments for students and faculty members at nearby Swedish Medical Center. And the cafeterias on campus banned trans fats from baked goods on campus earlier this year.

Colleges around the country are focusing on students' physical -- not just mental -- capabilities.

On campus, students often keep odd hours, may be too overwhelmed with classes to exercise and face all-you-can-eat style cafeterias.

Many students have questions about making healthy choices, said Deborah Hinchey, director of wellness and health promotion at Seattle University. For some, especially freshmen, it's the first time they've lived away from home -- and mom's cooking.

"They've never had to make those choices before," she said.

In the fall, the university launched a wellness and sports-performance program at Swedish, where a room is full of workout equipment: treadmill, elliptical machine and weights.

Students receive a physical assessment -- oxygen capacity, strength and heart rate, among other vitals -- by Seattle University staff and a workout plan to meet their fitness needs. They also receive a computer chip that plugs into the equipment to track their progress.

Seattle University is subsidizing the program 75 percent for students, 25 percent for faculty and staff members. Students only pay \$25 for four 60-minute sessions.

More than 230 students, faculty members, staff members and alumni have signed up for the program so far. Most of those want to "demystify all the stuff about health and fitness," said Dan Tripps, director for the Center for the Study of Sport & Exercise at the university.

Young people face a number of health claims from fitness chains, food products and television shows,

and may follow an exercise routine based on incorrect information, he said. The university wanted to create a more scientific approach.

Once students are tested, "we know exactly what they're capable of," Tripps said.

Graduate student Erika Moore, 36, received her assessment last month and received the results this week. She said she is trying to make her health more of a priority. And with the program's low cost to students, it's affordable.

"I think it's a great deal," she said.

Moore is also part of the fitness challenge that McCray and more than 450 others are participating in.

Students, faculty members and staff members sign up in teams of four and earn points for exercising, eating well and not smoking. Activities on campus -- such as group walks -- help students boost their score.

The challenge, which ends this month, rewards top individuals and teams with such prizes as REI gift cards.

It may also have unexpected academic benefits.

McCray and his friends stick to a workout schedule and try to return to their dorms in time to study. Now he's "hunkering down" and more on top of his studies.

Seattle University's cafeterias are also part of the effort to improve student health.

It identifies foods that are low fat, vegetarian and vegan in cafeterias and eateries.

Students tend to eat foods that they know best -- such as pizza and hamburgers, said Buzz Hofford, the food service director.

"We try to provide as many health alternatives as possible," he said, "so that the students can make intelligent decisions."

The majority of college students reported being in good health, according to a national survey conducted in the fall of 2005 by the American College Health Association.

About 61 percent of students reported maintaining a healthy weight while 23 percent considered themselves overweight. Close to 12 percent reported being obese.

Universities, many of which have high-tech gyms and recreational centers on campus, have developed a number of programs to help students get healthy.

At Columbia University in New York, students can log the time they spend working out online. The goal of the 100 m.i.l.e Club -- or Minutes I Logged Exercising -- is to engage in physical activity each week for at least 100 minutes.

The University of California-Santa Cruz is running its "Adopt a Slug" program, a play on the school mascot. Like Seattle University's fitness challenge, the Santa Cruz program encourages students to

exercise.

By working with students between their teenage years and young adulthood, campuses can help them develop the habits that will have for the rest of their lives, said Jane Bogart, coordinator for health promotion at Santa Cruz. It's an opportunity to influence "not just minds but bodies."

At about 6-foot-2 and 220 pounds, McCray, 18, said the original goal was to lose some weight. But after working out for a few weeks and watching what he eats, he is finding that some of his fat is turning into muscle.

Now he wants to get fit.

"I'm going to Hawaii for spring break," he said, "so I got to look good."

FIT SEATTLE

Seattle is back in the top of the rankings as one of the fittest cities in the United States.

The Emerald City ranks second behind Albuquerque, N.M., as the fittest American city in 2007, according to Men's Fitness magazine. It's a significant rebound from its topple from the top spot in 2005 to eighth last year.

Men's Fitness looks at data it say makes people fit or fat, including how much people exercise, how healthy they eat, how much junk food is consumed, how much time people sit in traffic and how often they use gym memberships. The magazine also talks to mayors and city parks departments to learn about the local restaurant venues, civic leadership and city fitness programs.

Rounding out the top five fittest cities are Colorado Springs, Colo., Minneapolis and Tucson, Ariz.

The magazine also ranks the fattest cities in America, giving the top 2007 honor to Las Vegas, followed by San Antonio, Miami, Mesa, Ariz., and Los Angeles.

TO STAY FIT

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends that adults spend at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most if not all days of the week. For more health tips, visit acsm.org.

LEARN MORE

Seattle University alumni can sign up for the Wellness and Sports Performance Program at Swedish Medical Center for \$105. For more information, visit www.seattleu.edu/artsci/css/wellness.asp.

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