

Develop a Physical Activity Referral Program to Support Physical and Mental Wellbeing at UBC Okanagan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by:

Kendra Arthurs, UBC Sustainability Scholar, 2019

Prepared for:

Casey Hamilton, Campus Health Specialist, The University of British Columbia
Okanagan

Tanya Forneris, School of Health and Exercise Sciences, The University of British
Columbia Okanagan

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Introduction

The University of British Columbia is dedicated to improving physical and mental wellbeing of students, staff, and faculty and sees the particular value of physical activity in achieving this goal. This is demonstrated in *UBC's Action Framework to Increase Physical Activity and Reduce Sedentary Behaviour* (2017). The objective of this action framework is to promote physical activity by providing the campus population with options that are easily understandable and accessible and work to encourage the incorporation of physical activity into the daily routine. This goal is also in line with *UBC's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* (2012), which proposes an increase in campus life programs and services to support student wellbeing, personal development, and a positive affiliation with the university. As a strategy to work towards these calls to action, UBC Okanagan is developing the Physical Activity Referral Program made in collaboration with Campus Health, Health & Wellness, Campus Recreation, and the School of Health and Exercise Sciences. Through this program, students will be prescribed physical activity as part of their healthcare plan in order to increase their fitness-related behaviours and therefore improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing. This program is to be implemented Fall 2019.

Background

It is well known that physical activity can be used to effectively enhance overall health and wellbeing. For example, participation in physical activity can lead to decreased body mass and increased muscle tone and strength. Physical activity can also reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, certain types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and obesity (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2011). Recently, there has been strong evidence to support that the benefits of physical activity also extend to mental health and wellbeing (de Vries et al., 2016; Dogra et al., 2018; Lovell et al., 2015; Skead & Rogers, 2016; Tyson et al., 2010; Wunsch et al., 2017; Yiğiter, 2014). For example, physical activity has been shown to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety, reduce stress and fatigue, enhance sleep quality, and increase self-esteem (de Vries et al., 2016; Dogra et al., 2018; Lovell et al., 2015; Wunsch et al., 2017; Yiğiter, 2014). Despite the well-documented relationship between physical activity and mental health and the treatment of mental health concerns, it is estimated that approximately 40-50% of post-secondary students do not participate in any physical activity (Dogra et al., 2018). This inactivity is directly related to the accumulation of sedentary time and screen time, which in itself is associated with decreased mental health status (Dogra et al., 2018).

To address the concern of inactivity, many healthcare practitioners are now prescribing physical activity as a form of treatment to their clients. This is often referred to as an exercise prescription. Typically, an exercise prescription is a specific plan or program of fitness-related activities that is designed by a fitness professional, such as a personal trainer. This plan is developed to meet the specific needs and interests of the client and to assist them in achieving their physical and mental wellbeing-related goals. Subsequently, this objective can be achieved not only by encouraging clients to increase their physical activity levels, but by addressing the barriers that may prevent them from beginning and maintaining exercise behaviours. The Physical Activity Referral Program is based around the exercise prescription model. However, instead of utilizing fitness professionals, the program will be delivered by students.

Program Development Approach [Methodology]

The first step in the program development process was to conduct a literature review on the benefits of exercise on physical and mental health of post-secondary students. Time was also allocated to exploring existing exercise prescription or similar programs at other universities across the country. These explorations provided insight regarding how to develop the program as well as evidence-based research to ensure buy-in from potential participants and stakeholders. A meeting with stakeholders was held to determine how the UBCO program was currently functioning and what the team's goals were for further development of the program. This team was titled the Physical Activity Referral Committee. Committee meetings were ongoing throughout the program development process. The goals identified by the team guided the direction of program development. The key areas for consideration included the process of referral into the program, determining the method of program delivery, and developing a program evaluation. These considerations are outlined in more detail below.

In terms of referral, it was pre-determined that all referrals would come solely from Health & Wellness. It was also pre-determined that that target population for this program were students experiencing mental or physical health concerns. Aspects that required attention included determining what specific concerns would trigger referral into the program, what program-related resources were provided to students upon referral, how to ensure students' confidentiality, and what the process and tools for communication between the site of referral and the site of program delivery would be.

The second area of consideration was in regard to program delivery. It was pre-determined that students referred into the program would receive service from the Campus Recreation gym. Further considerations in this area included who would deliver the program, program logistics

such as duration, time commitment, and capacity, and finally how the program activities would be financially supported.

Lastly, a program evaluation was created, including calls for feedback from the students who participated in the program, the individuals involved in running the program, and members of the team who provide referrals and support.

A comprehensive manual was created to present this information to those involved in program delivery. Subsequently, student resources were created to educate them on the program.

Program Summary

The basics of the Physical Activity Referral Program are described hereafter. Throughout Winter terms 1 and 2, students visiting Health and Wellness will be assessed for their interest and suitability to partake in the Physical Activity Referral Program. Referral to the program will be made directly by the practitioners within Health and Wellness. Students are provided with the opportunity to pursue one of two program options, which are described in more detail below.

Option 1: Students may pursue this option if they have high interest in having a peer accompany them to exercise session(s) as well as provide assistance in learning fitness-related activities. Students referred to this option will be paired with a 4th year student in the Human Kinetics program, called a Physical Activity Mentor. Their role is to assist in fitness-related skill development and provide encouragement and accountability to students. Referred students will be provided with 10 free entries to the Campus gym. Students will decide how many sessions (1-10) they would like to be accompanied by their Physical Activity Mentor. The program duration is expected to take approximately 5 weeks, with students partaking in 2 sessions per week. However, students are provided with a maximum of 8 weeks to complete their sessions.

Option 2: Students who are not interested or ready to exercise alongside a peer may pursue this option. These students are provided with 10 free entries into the Campus gym. If they choose, they can bring a friend who will also receive this free pass. Students are provided with a maximum time limit of 8 weeks to use their free passes. There is no minimum time limit to complete this option. It will be recommended that students pursuing this option a) have a history of participation in exercise and b) have weekly check-ins with a Physical Activity Mentor to answer questions and assist in keeping them accountable.

Conclusion and Recommendations [Next Steps]

It is recommended that ongoing development of the Physical Activity Referral Program occurs in order to ensure that the above mentioned goals and objectives continue to be met. Program development will be accompanied by evaluations of the program and will involve collecting feedback from multiple sources:

- Students going through the program
- Individuals involved in delivering the program (Physical Activity Mentors)
- Team members on the Physical Activity Referral Committee

It will be the responsibility of those involved in overseeing and delivering the program to implement the received feedback/recommendations to the best of their ability to ensure consistent growth of the program. This will involve ongoing committee meetings at the beginning of every term. As the program is in its pilot phase, feedback has not been collected to date. Nonetheless, foreseeable recommendations pertaining to the improvement and growth of this program include:

- Hiring a supervisor to oversee the Physical Activity Mentors and provide them with more in-depth training and guidance related to mental health, building rapport etc.
- Encourage Physical Activity Mentors to complete the required training to become certified personal trainers, as this certification will allow them the ability to provide students with more detailed exercise plans that meet the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines and the FITT principle
- Make the Physical Activity Referral Program an established practicum placement opportunity for students in the Human Kinetics Program
- Involving more campus partners in the referral process so more students are made aware of the program
- Develop promotional materials
- Expand the team which will in turn increase the capacity of the program to reach more students
- Update resources in the Physical Activity Referral Program Manual

It is expected that with the deliverance of this program UBC Okanagan will make progress in regard to the goal of improving mental and physical health and wellbeing on campus as well as increasing physical activity behaviours.

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