

Researchers study strength-training gender gap, possible solutions

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Strength training is an important part of any exercise routine, but some women may not be getting the recommended hours. New Penn State research discovered some of the barriers preventing women from strength training, as well as some solutions to overcoming those obstacles.

In a study of college students, researchers found that [women](#) were less likely than men to participate in muscle-strengthening activities and use weight areas in campus recreation facilities. But, the researchers also found that women were more likely to feel uncomfortable using campus recreation facilities—and weight areas in particular.

Oliver Wilson, [graduate student](#) in kinesiology, said the study suggests that there are gender differences in both physical exercise habits and campus facility use. He added that there may be opportunities for school administrators, policy makers and others to help provide equal opportunities for everyone.

"Ideally, all students—regardless of gender identity, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and/or socio-economic status—should participate in muscle-strengthening activities," Wilson said.

"Implementation and enforcement of policies, facility design and equipment layout, supportive social environments, and other opportunities for students to build the skills and confidence to participate in muscle-strengthening activities are necessary to provide equitable opportunities for all."

According to the researchers, previous research has consistently found disparities in [physical activity](#) between men and women. Additionally, prior work has found certain areas of campus recreational facilities to be highly gendered spaces.

For example, the researchers said women may feel constrained from using the free weights section of some facilities due to a lack of knowledge or confidence, crowded spaces, or unsolicited advice from male peers.

Melissa Bopp, associate professor of kinesiology, said that because a person's college-age years are an [important period](#) for establishing good

exercise habits, they wanted to investigate potential reasons and solutions for these disparities.

"It was important to ask these questions because we know that physical activity participation typically declines across students' time in college despite the access they may have to facilities," Bopp said. "It's important to understand why this decline happens before we can create strategies for promoting physical activity."

The researchers recruited 319 college students for the study. The participants were asked to complete a survey designed to measure physical activity and their use and comfort in using campus recreational facilities, as well as their reasons and potential solutions for feeling uncomfortable using the facilities.

According to Wilson, meaningful differences in physical activity behaviors, facility use, and comfort levels in using facilities between male and female students appeared once the data were analyzed.

"Women reported less muscle-strengthening activity, lower frequency of both weight use and informal sport participation, and higher frequency of cardio and group exercise participation," Wilson said. "Women also reported lower comfort using facilities in general—as well as machine weights, free weights, and indoor running tracks—compared to men."

The researchers found that the presence and behaviors of men, feeling like they don't know how to properly use the equipment, and feeling self-consciousness emerged as common themes women gave for not using weight equipment.

"It is uncomfortable using certain parts of the recreational facilities because it is often divided into mostly women using the cardio machines and men in the weight section," according to one anonymous participant

quoted in the study. "So, even though I like using weights, it can be a little intimidating going into a room full of guys by myself to work out with weights."

The participants also provided potential solutions that could help them feel more comfortable participating in muscle strengthening activities. Themes included the addition of women's-only sections or hours, as well as implementing sexual harassment policies.

Bopp said the study—recently published in the *Journal of American College Health*—suggests that making campus recreational facilities more open and welcoming to all students may be key to ensuring equitable opportunities for all to get the exercise they need.

"I think that it's important to understand that despite the fact that we have wonderful resources for physical activity on our campus, they sometimes don't feel accessible to everyone," Bopp said. "Whether it's the culture or policies that need to be changed to create a welcoming environment remains to be seen, but it also informs us that physical activity behavior is complex—just having a place to be active doesn't ensure exercise participation."

More information: Oliver W. A. Wilson et al, Gender differences in college student physical activity, and campus recreational facility use, and comfort, *Journal of American College Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/07448481.2020.1804388](https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1804388)

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