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## Research Article


# Physical Fitness Among College Students: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>This paper explores the current state of physical fitness among college students, focusing on prevalent trends, the challenges they face, and opportunities for enhancing their health. As students transition to college life, they often encounter changes that lead to a decrease in physical activity. A combination of academic demands, time constraints, and increased social engagements can hinder students from maintaining regular exercise routines. Additionally, poor dietary habits—such as relying on fast food and skipping meals—exacerbate the decline in fitness. Mental health issues like anxiety and depression further prevent students from prioritizing physical activity, resulting in negative effects on both their physical and mental well-being. Drawing from recent national surveys and scholarly studies, this paper examines the barriers to maintaining an active lifestyle and identifies effective strategies for overcoming them. Research shows that a significant number of students fail to meet the recommended levels of physical activity, with key challenges including limited access to fitness facilities, lack of time management skills, and discomfort in gym environments. Despite these barriers, many universities have introduced initiatives aimed at improving student health, such as offering subsidized gym memberships, hosting fitness challenges, and providing wellness-focused workshops. These efforts have had a positive impact on student participation in physical activities, resulting in improved overall health. This paper underscores the importance of universities adopting a more integrated and proactive approach to student wellness. By creating accessible fitness resources, promoting healthier environments, and supporting a culture of physical activity, colleges can help students lead healthier lives. The recommendations in this paper suggest actionable strategies for institutions to improve student health outcomes and enhance academic performance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>ISSN No:</b> 2583-7397</li> <li>▪ <b>Received:</b> 23-02-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>Accepted:</b> 27-03-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>Published:</b> 19-04-2025</li> <li>▪ <b>IJCRM:</b> 4(2); 2025: 254-260</li> <li>▪ <b>©2025, All Rights Reserved</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Plagiarism Checked:</b> Yes</li> <li>▪ <b>Peer Review Process:</b> Yes</li> </ul> <p><b>How to Cite this Article</b></p> <p>Champawat BS. Physical fitness among college students: trends, challenges, and opportunities. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(2):254–260.</p> <p><b>Access this Article Online</b></p>  <p><a href="http://www.multiarticlesjournal.com">www.multiarticlesjournal.com</a></p>

**KEYWORDS:** College students, physical fitness, health barriers, mental health, wellness initiatives, dietary habits, active lifestyle.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The shift to college life introduces new freedoms and responsibilities, often disrupting established routines related to physical activity, nutrition, and sleep. For many students, college marks the first time they have to independently manage their

daily schedules, meal plans, and fitness routines. This transition can often lead to a decline in physical activity levels and an increase in sedentary behavior, particularly for students facing academic, social, and financial stressors. Recent studies illustrate the significant impact of this lifestyle change. According to a

2023 survey of college students, only about 55% report engaging in regular physical activity, with walking being the most common form of exercise. However, over half of the participants cited lack of time as a primary barrier to staying active. Furthermore, data from a study on university students found that approximately two-thirds of them have low physical activity levels, with female students showing even lower activity rates than their male peers. Physical fitness is essential not only for maintaining physical health but also for supporting mental health, cognitive performance, and emotional well-being. Numerous studies have demonstrated that regular exercise is linked to higher academic performance and a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression. For example, research involving undergraduate students revealed that those who participated in higher levels of physical activity reported better health outcomes, including enhanced physical and mental health. Exercise has been shown to boost brain function, improve memory and concentration, and increase overall academic performance. Moreover, physical activity is proven to alleviate stress and anxiety, helping students manage the pressures of college life. Despite these well-established benefits, many students face challenges in maintaining a regular fitness routine. Identifying the barriers that prevent students from engaging in physical activity and exploring effective solutions is essential for promoting a healthier and more balanced college experience. This paper aims to examine the current state of physical fitness among college students, focusing on the challenges they face, the trends in student health, and potential strategies for improvement.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research highlights the decline in physical activity levels among college students after they transition from high school. This reduction is often linked to various factors, such as academic pressures, social changes, and a shift from structured routines to more independent schedules. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA), less than half of college students engage in the recommended 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week. This indicates that many students fail to meet basic fitness guidelines, which are essential for maintaining overall health and well-being (ACHA, 2023). Studies show that nearly 60% of college students experience a decrease in physical activity after entering university, particularly during their first year. Research by Keating et al. (2021) suggests that this decline is most noticeable among first-year students, who face significant changes in their environment, including academic challenges and living away from home. The National College Health Assessment (2023) further supports this finding, showing that a large proportion of students struggle to maintain regular physical activity due to time constraints and increased academic workloads. Increased screen time has also been linked to the decline in physical activity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that many students substitute physical activity with sedentary behaviors, including prolonged hours spent studying, browsing social media, or watching television.

These behaviors contribute to a sedentary lifestyle, which is associated with several health risks, including obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health issues (CDC, 2022). Barriers to physical activity among college students are multifaceted and can be classified into personal, environmental, and systemic factors. On a personal level, many students report difficulties in managing their time effectively, leaving little opportunity for physical activity. Balancing academic commitments, social life, and part-time jobs often makes it challenging for students to prioritize fitness (Alderman et al., 2019). In addition, some students lack motivation or feel self-conscious about their physical abilities, which can discourage them from engaging in fitness activities. Female students, in particular, report lower levels of confidence in gym environments and may be more reluctant to participate in physical activities due to concerns about body image or social judgment (Piko et al., 2020). Mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, are also significant barriers to physical activity. According to the American Psychological Association (2022), students experiencing high levels of stress are less likely to engage in exercise, despite its well-documented benefits for mental health. Regular physical activity is known to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and improve emotional well-being, yet many students find it difficult to maintain a consistent exercise routine during periods of high stress. Additionally, gender differences in physical activity levels are evident, with male students generally reporting higher levels of physical activity than female students. This gap can be attributed to various factors, including social norms, cultural expectations, and the types of activities typically associated with each gender. Furthermore, international students and those from lower-income backgrounds often face unique challenges, such as limited access to affordable fitness resources, cultural differences in attitudes toward exercise, and financial barriers that prevent them from participating in fitness programs (Meyer & Mullan, 2020). In conclusion, while physical activity is crucial for the physical and mental health of college students, several barriers prevent many from maintaining an active lifestyle. Addressing these obstacles, such as improving time management, enhancing access to fitness facilities, offering mental health support, and creating inclusive fitness programs, is essential for fostering a healthier and more active student population.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the physical fitness levels of college students. The combination of numerical data and personal insights enables a comprehensive exploration of the factors influencing students' engagement in physical activity. By utilizing both broad surveys and in-depth personal narratives, this research aims to identify key trends in student fitness behaviors and uncover the personal and contextual factors that either promote or hinder physical activity.

### Quantitative Approach

The quantitative aspect of the research relies on large-scale surveys and existing national datasets to capture general trends in physical activity among college students. Key sources for this data include the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These datasets offer valuable insights into the overall physical activity levels of college students and allow for comparisons across different demographic groups. The National College Health Assessment (NCHA), conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA), is a crucial source of data on the health behaviors of college students. This survey covers various topics, including physical fitness, mental health, substance use, and nutrition. The 2023 NCHA report indicates that less than half of students meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity, which highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve student fitness levels. This data provides a snapshot of how college students are engaging with physical fitness in the context of their academic and social lives. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), managed by the CDC, collects data on the behaviors that influence the health of youth and young adults. The YRBSS includes detailed information on physical activity patterns, sedentary behaviors, and other health-related issues among high school and college-aged students. By examining these national trends, this study is able to compare college students' physical activity behaviors with broader adolescent health patterns, highlighting any significant differences or concerns. In addition to these primary datasets, the study draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles in the fields of public health, health psychology, and exercise science. These academic sources provide deeper insights into the psychological, environmental, and social factors that contribute to or impede physical activity among college students. This literature often discusses barriers such as time constraints, lack of motivation, and mental health issues, all of which may limit students' ability to engage in regular physical exercise.

### Qualitative Approach

To complement the quantitative data, the study incorporates qualitative insights gathered through focus group discussions. These focus groups aim to capture the personal experiences and perspectives of students regarding physical activity. By engaging directly with students from diverse backgrounds, the study seeks to understand the individual and collective challenges students face in maintaining an active lifestyle, as well as their motivations for exercise. Focus group participants were selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, academic discipline, socio-economic background, and year of study. The discussions were designed to explore students' exercise habits, their perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of fitness resources on campus, and the social or psychological factors that influence their engagement in physical activity. Through these discussions, the study sought to identify recurring themes, such as the impact of academic stress on physical activity, the role of

social support in motivating exercise, and the barriers related to body image or gym anxiety. The focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate data capture. The transcriptions were then analyzed through a thematic coding process, allowing for the identification of key factors that impact students' physical fitness behaviors. Common themes that emerged included time constraints due to academic workloads, the importance of accessible fitness facilities, and the influence of peer support in encouraging physical activity.

### Institutional Reports

In addition to national surveys and focus group data, the study also reviews institutional health and wellness reports from universities. These reports provide valuable data on the availability and usage of fitness resources on campus, such as gym memberships, fitness classes, and wellness programs. Many universities conduct their own health assessments to better understand student health behaviors, including physical activity levels, and use this data to inform wellness programs. By combining quantitative data from national surveys, qualitative data from focus groups, and institutional reports, this study offers a multifaceted analysis of the factors influencing physical activity among college students. This mixed-methods approach allows for both a broad understanding of national trends and a deeper, more nuanced exploration of the individual and contextual barriers that affect students' ability to stay active.

## 4. FINDINGS

The analysis of survey results, focus group insights, and institutional data reveals several trends and challenges that impact the physical fitness and well-being of college students. These findings provide a clearer understanding of the behaviors and obstacles students face when it comes to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

### 4.1 Physical Activity Patterns

The survey data consistently demonstrates that a large proportion of college students fail to meet national physical activity guidelines. A noticeable decline in physical activity is commonly observed after the first semester of college, as students encounter challenges in balancing academic, social, and personal responsibilities. According to the National College Health Assessment (NCHA), fewer than half of college students engage in the recommended 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week. Many students, in an effort to manage their busy schedules, substitute organized sports or recreational activities with low-intensity exercises such as walking or biking. Focus group discussions further revealed that students often report feeling guilty for not maintaining regular exercise routines, with academic pressures and lack of time cited as major obstacles. Additionally, many students expressed that they felt unmotivated and lacked support, which compounded the challenge of staying active.

## 4.2 Nutrition and Dietary Habits

Diet plays a vital role in overall fitness, yet many college students struggle with poor dietary choices. Common habits include skipping meals, consuming high-sugar and high-fat foods, and frequently eating fast food. Inconsistent meal patterns are widespread, as students often prioritize academics or social activities over regular meals. Caffeine consumption, especially in the form of sugary energy drinks, is also prevalent as students attempt to combat fatigue from late-night studying. The 2023 NCHA report highlights that nearly 30% of students eat fewer than three servings of fruits and vegetables daily, while more than half often consume sugary foods and beverages. These dietary behaviors can negatively affect students' energy levels, concentration, and overall health, potentially leading to long-term health risks such as obesity and heart disease. Students' reliance on caffeine, in particular, can disrupt their sleep and exacerbate stress levels, further impacting their health.

## 4.3 Sleep and Recovery

Sleep deprivation is another significant concern among college students. Many students sacrifice sleep to meet academic demands or participate in social events. The 2023 NCHA survey found that nearly 40% of students reported getting less than six hours of sleep per night, which is far below the recommended amount of 7–9 hours for optimal health. Focus group participants shared that sleep is often seen as expendable, with academic responsibilities or socializing taking precedence. This lack of sufficient sleep has wide-reaching consequences, including impaired physical recovery, decreased cognitive performance, and heightened levels of stress. Additionally, insufficient sleep can reduce motivation to exercise, contributing to a cycle of inactivity. The effects of sleep deprivation on emotional health, such as heightened anxiety and irritability, were also highlighted by students in focus groups.

## 4.4 Mental Health and Physical Activity

The connection between physical activity and mental health was found to be significant. Students who engage in regular physical exercise report lower levels of anxiety, depression, and perceived stress. Research indicates that physical activity triggers the release of endorphins, which improve mood and help mitigate symptoms of depression. Many students in the focus groups indicated that regular exercise played a critical role in managing stress and enhancing their mental well-being. Moreover, students noted that engaging in physical activity provided a valuable break from academic pressures, offering them a chance to relax and recharge. Physical activity was not only linked to improved mood and emotional resilience but also to greater academic engagement and productivity. Students who were able to maintain an exercise routine reported feeling more focused and motivated in their studies.

## 4.5 Institutional Support and Resources

Institutional support for student wellness varies significantly across colleges and universities. Some institutions have made notable strides in providing accessible fitness resources and

promoting wellness. These initiatives include offering free access to fitness centers, organizing fitness classes, providing health coaching and counseling services, and implementing incentive-based wellness programs. For example, universities like the University of California and the University of Michigan provide students with complimentary gym memberships, fitness classes, and organized wellness challenges to encourage regular physical activity. However, not all colleges have the resources to provide such comprehensive wellness programs. Many community colleges and underfunded public universities report limited access to fitness facilities and wellness initiatives. Students attending these institutions often face barriers such as limited gym hours, lack of affordable fitness programs, and inadequate campus resources. As a result, these students may be less likely to maintain a consistent exercise routine. In conclusion, the findings suggest that while physical fitness is a crucial component of overall student well-being, many students face significant barriers that hinder their ability to stay active. Academic pressures, poor eating habits, sleep deprivation, and mental health challenges all contribute to reduced physical activity levels. However, institutions that offer robust wellness programs and accessible fitness resources can play a crucial role in supporting students in overcoming these barriers and improving their overall health and well-being.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges and influences that shape physical fitness among college students. While personal choices and behaviors are important, they are often shaped by broader environmental and systemic factors. Factors such as academic pressures, time constraints, and mental health challenges play a significant role in students' ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Academic demands are one of the primary barriers to regular physical activity. College students often find themselves balancing demanding coursework, social activities, and, in many cases, part-time work, leaving little time for physical exercise. This constant juggling of responsibilities contributes to stress, anxiety, and fatigue, which can further reduce the motivation to engage in physical activity. As seen in the findings, many students struggle to maintain exercise routines, particularly when they perceive them as competing with their academic success or social obligations. This indicates that interventions to improve physical activity must consider the broader college experience, not just the promotion of exercise itself. A more holistic approach is required to tackle the issue effectively. Universities need to create environments that actively promote well-being by offering accessible fitness resources, educational programming, and integrated wellness services. This approach should not focus solely on fitness but also address mental health, stress management, and time management. By offering free or affordable access to fitness facilities, wellness workshops, and personalized health coaching, universities can give students the resources they need to make health-conscious decisions despite their busy schedules.



Faculty and administrators also play a critical role in supporting student health. Academic stress is often cited as a significant barrier to maintaining an active lifestyle. By recognizing the impact of academic pressures on physical well-being and fostering a supportive environment, faculty can encourage students to integrate healthy habits into their routines. Promoting a balanced lifestyle through clear communication about the importance of physical activity, proper sleep, and nutrition can enhance students' ability to manage their academic responsibilities while maintaining their physical and mental health. In addition to institutional support, technology can be an effective tool in encouraging and facilitating student fitness. Fitness tracking apps, virtual workout platforms, and online support communities can provide students with easy access to physical activity resources. These platforms also help students stay motivated, track their progress, and feel a sense of community. As digital engagement continues to grow among students, integrating technology into wellness programs offers a personalized and flexible approach to supporting student fitness. Inclusivity must also be prioritized when designing fitness programs. Ensuring that wellness programs are accessible to all students, regardless of background, physical ability, or fitness level, is crucial. Programs should be tailored to meet the needs of a diverse student body, including those with physical disabilities or cultural differences. By offering inclusive, welcoming fitness options, universities can ensure that all students feel supported and empowered to engage in physical activity. In conclusion, addressing the challenges related to student fitness requires a comprehensive approach that considers both individual behaviors and institutional support systems. By creating an environment that fosters wellness through accessible resources, mental health support, and inclusive programming, universities can help students adopt healthier lifestyles that contribute to their academic success and overall well-being.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Physical fitness is an essential aspect of college students' overall well-being, though it is frequently overlooked or given lower priority within higher education institutions. The college years bring about many lifestyle changes, with students often facing significant academic pressure, financial challenges, and social demands that can negatively impact their health. Despite these challenges, maintaining a focus on physical fitness remains crucial for students' mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Research consistently shows that physical activity plays an important role in reducing stress, improving mood, and enhancing cognitive function, which, in turn, can positively affect academic performance. However, many students encounter obstacles that make it difficult to maintain a consistent fitness routine, such as time constraints, lack of motivation, mental health issues, and limited access to fitness facilities. These barriers are compounded by the social and academic expectations of college life, making it necessary for universities to take an active and supportive role in fostering wellness. It is clear that addressing student fitness requires a holistic approach—one that includes not only encouraging physical

activity but also providing adequate resources, support, and education. By creating environments where fitness is integrated into the daily student experience, universities can ensure that students are empowered to prioritize their health. Promoting wellness on campuses will not only improve students' physical health but also contribute to better academic outcomes, enhanced emotional resilience, and a foundation for lifelong well-being.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Incorporate Physical Wellness into Orientation Programs:

To lay the groundwork for a healthy college experience, it is essential that universities include fitness education as part of their orientation programs. Incoming students should be educated on the significance of staying physically active, the impact of fitness on mental health, and the wellness resources available on campus. Introducing students to these concepts early on can help them make informed decisions about how to integrate physical activity into their busy schedules.

**2. Expand Access to Fitness Resources:** Ensuring that fitness facilities are easily accessible and affordable is essential in supporting student health. Universities should strive to provide students with free or low-cost access to gyms, fitness classes, and recreational spaces. Additionally, extending the hours of operation for fitness centers can help accommodate students with demanding schedules. Offering flexible options allows students to find time for physical activity without compromising their academic or social obligations.

**3. Provide Incentives for Active Participation:** Motivating students to remain active can be achieved through reward-based systems. Incentive programs that offer tangible rewards—such as discounts on campus services, participation in fitness challenges, or access to exclusive events—can encourage students to take part in regular fitness activities. Rewards not only provide students with an added incentive but also foster a sense of community and accomplishment, further promoting sustained engagement with fitness programs.

**4. Utilize Technology to Encourage Fitness:** The use of technology can be highly effective in engaging students and promoting physical activity. Fitness tracking apps, virtual workout platforms, and wellness challenges can provide students with personalized fitness plans, monitor their progress, and connect them to other students with similar goals. Integrating these tools into wellness programs can make it easier for students to stay motivated and engaged, offering them the flexibility to work out at their convenience.

**5. Adopt a Holistic Approach to Mental Health and Fitness:** Physical fitness and mental health are deeply intertwined. Colleges should aim to address both dimensions of student wellness simultaneously by offering integrated programs that combine physical fitness with mental health services. Providing counseling, stress management workshops, and fitness classes in tandem can give students a well-rounded support system,

ensuring they have the tools they need to maintain both their physical and mental health.

#### 6. Encourage Faculty Participation in Wellness Programs:

Faculty members can play a pivotal role in promoting physical health among students. Professors should be encouraged to integrate wellness into the classroom, such as incorporating physical activity breaks during lectures or including topics related to health and fitness in their course content. By actively modeling healthy habits and fostering an open dialogue about wellness, faculty can influence students to prioritize their health.

**7. Create Inclusive Wellness Programs:** To ensure that all students feel welcome and supported in their pursuit of fitness, universities must design inclusive and culturally sensitive wellness programs. These programs should accommodate diverse fitness levels, abilities, and backgrounds, ensuring that all students—whether they are beginners or seasoned athletes—feel comfortable participating. Offering a variety of fitness classes, such as yoga, strength training, and mindfulness activities, ensures that students have options that fit their individual needs and preferences.

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