

Freshman Fit: A Collaborative Approach to First-year Engagement Practices

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Health and Human Performance

Middle Tennessee State University

May 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my husband Jaron and both of our families and friends for their unwavering love and support throughout this long process. Without Jaron's great sacrifices, I would not have been able to fulfill this dream of mine. Jaron: Thank you for being such a supportive husband and father. We couldn't do life without you. To my sweet girl: Chase your dreams Alaina-Grace. No matter how big or small. You deserve the world.

I would also like to thank Dr. Rudy Dunlap, Dr. Bethany Wrye, and Dr. Stacey Hall for persevering with me and pushing me to finish when I wanted to give up. Finally, I would like to thank Josh Stone, his staff, and the Freshman Fit participants at the MTSU Campus Recreation Center who helped to make this possible.

ABSTRACT

With college completion and retention rates moving to the forefront of education efforts, student engagement has earned the interest of many scholars, university efforts, and funding agencies. Student engagement is typically defined as the time and energy students invest to educationally purposeful activities and the effort put forth of the institution (Leach, 2017). Student engagement encompasses what students do that leads to success in their learning. Another key factor when looking at student success is the idea of sense of belonging, which is an important factor for both retention and engagement. Belonging is defined as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by teachers and peers, and the associated idea that she or he is an important part of the campus community (Thomas, 2012). Campus recreation, a department typically located within student affairs, can play a vital role in increasing student engagement and sense of belonging through programming. The purpose of this qualitative program evaluation was to explore Campus Recreation programming, specifically Freshman Fit, and any associated student engagement behaviors. Specific behaviors that were explored are sense of belonging and social interactions. This qualitative program evaluation explored the participants' perception of the program as it relates to their own engagement at the university, and the role engagement plays in their defined success at the university.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>A Brief Literature Review</i>	3
<i>Site Selection</i>	7
<i>Methodology</i>	8
<i>Purpose and Research Questions</i>	10
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	12
<i>History of Student Engagement</i>	13
<i>Student Engagement Defined</i>	20
<i>Belonging and Community</i>	23
<i>Communities of Practice</i>	24
<i>The Role of Campus Recreation</i>	28
<i>First-year Students</i>	31
<i>Moving Forward</i>	33
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	34
<i>Site Selection</i>	34
<i>Research Methodology</i>	37
<i>Data Collection</i>	40
<i>Data Analysis & Interpretation</i>	43
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	44
<i>Projected Timeline</i>	46
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	47
<i>Involvement</i>	49

<i>Being Included</i>	51
<i>Interactions</i>	51
<i>Engagement Indicators</i>	54
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	58
<i>Additional Findings</i>	62
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION.....	65
<i>Social Connections</i>	66
<i>Engagement Indicators</i>	70
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	73
<i>Social Learning Theory & Communities of Practice</i>	75
<i>Additional Findings</i>	80
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH.....	83
<i>Implications and Recommendations</i>	83
<i>Improvement of Research Design</i>	86
<i>Implications for Practice</i>	90
<i>Future Considerations</i>	92
REFERENCES.....	98
APPENDIX A: FRESHMAN FIT MATERIAL.....	107
APPENDIX B: FRESHMAN FIT AGENDA.....	118
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE.....	119
APPENDIX D: QUESTIONAIRE.....	123
APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL PAGE.....	127

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

College completion rates have moved to the forefront of United States education efforts. College has grown to be an expectation of many, with 69.7% of high school graduates enrolling in college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Going to college is understood to be a common, logical next step after students graduate high school, and a recent survey found that those who believe higher education to be necessary for success increased from 31% in 2000 to 55% in 2009 (Schleifer & Silliman, 2016). Although enrollment may be climbing, fewer than half of 2004 high school graduates saw that to completion and earned a college degree (Karp, 2015). Since it has been recognized that high school graduation is no longer sufficient for economic success, colleges around the country are working towards creating programs focused on strengthening student engagement and thereby ensuring college completion.

Student engagement is typically defined as the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort put forth of the institution (Leach, 2017). Student engagement encompasses what students do that leads to success in their learning. This idea of student engagement is a main focus of many student affairs departments in universities across the country in order to best meet the needs of the student and the university. Interestingly, administrators have recognized that the more students participate and become involved in social and academic activities at the university, the more likely they are to persist with their studies (Tinto, 1998). Another key factor when looking at student success is the idea of sense of belonging, which is an important factor for both retention and engagement. Belonging is defined as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by teachers and peers, and the

associated idea that she or he is an important part of the campus community (Thomas, 2012). Not surprisingly, this concept is being used to create programs to help students make a smooth transition from high school to college.

For traditionally aged students, college is a period where a teenager takes the first steps to transitioning to an adult. It is also a time of socialization, experimentation, and growth that can be accompanied with periods of stress, depression and loneliness. During this time, these young adults are given new responsibilities and face new situations and temptations. Without structure, guidance, and co-curricular activities, it is easy for students to get lost in the crowd and get distracted from their academic responsibilities. New social interactions, the presence of alcohol, changes in nutrition choices, and time management demands all play roles in the success of the student and may be causes of distraction. In order to help with this transition and combat these feelings, many university administrators are focusing on programming in order to provide activities and education for the students to increase both engagement and sense of belonging to the university. In order to improve students' experiences, this programming may also have the added benefits of helping universities avoid litigation and stay out of the press.

Campus recreation, a department within student affairs, can play a vital role in increasing student engagement through programming and collaboration with other departments across the university. Campus recreation offers a variety of activities available to students, while also focusing on their physical and mental health and increasing engagement. Exemplary of this trend, campus recreation staff is working hard to promote engagement patterns amongst students that can be carried with them to other aspects of their college career.

A Brief Literature Review

The Evolving University

As the education structure moves away from focusing solely on traditional academic subjects, students are learning important life skills. By teaching students leadership, communication, and organization skills university administrators and staff are giving students the tools to be successful in many different areas in their life, including professional, social, and familial. In addition to giving the students access to these tools, the university also provides areas, through their student affairs departments, for students to grow and learn socially. Student affairs typically house several smaller departments such as Greek Life, community service, student union, academic services, and campus recreation. Through program planning, via the various departments of student affairs, students are given the opportunity to interact with other students in a safe, and often free, environment while professionals are able to mentor students in engaging atmospheres such as movie nights, cookouts, dances, concerts, health fairs, art classes, and sport viewing parties. These programs allow students to socialize and build new relationships while providing structure to their day (Greaney et al., 2009).

Student Engagement

One of the main focuses of the student affairs department is to offer opportunities for students to interact and engage in new activities and thereby increase student engagement with the university overall. While campus recreation, a department within student affairs, offers knowledge and a place for healthy habits to form, the students are also provided an area to grow and learn socially. Looking a little deeper at this department, campus recreation programming aligns with the model of student

engagement. As a result of the evolving university, increasing attention has been drawn to discovering the most effective strategies for engaging students (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defines student engagement as the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices or more simply put, what the student does that leads to success in their learning (Leach, 2016).

There are multiple factors that promote student engagement. Some key factors include institutional commitment to student retention and engagement, academic ability, university preparedness, fostering of positive relationships between staff and students, student motivation and self-efficacy, friendship formation, and balance of a healthy study/life balance with social support (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Encouraging students to believe that they can learn from their experiences and giving them control over the learning process helps to develop self-confidence (Weimer, 2012). Professionals are also an important part of the engagement puzzle, where they must be sensitive to students' needs, approachable, and well prepared in order to increase student commitment to the process. The process of learning must also be considered. Students should be given the opportunity to reflect, question the information at hand, evaluate and make connections between ideas (Weimer, 2012). Nonacademic factors play an important role in the decision-making process on whether or not a student will stay at a university (Everett, 2017). The nature of these relationships is an important factor that influences engagement (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Staff who take steps to encourage a deep level of learning and engagement with students are able to help prevent students from developing a sense of alienation and in turn can increase the feeling of community. In order to increase

engagement a student needs to feel welcome and that they belong at an institution (Weimer, 2012). Belonging is a key factor that must be considered when looking at student engagement as it helps to foster positive relationships and increase commitment to the university.

Community

Belonging has been closely associated with engagement and can be fostered by a range of academic and extracurricular programs (Nasuja & Jones, 2016). Belonging is conceptualized as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged, and feeling that they are an important part of the university (Thomas, 2012). Sense of belonging is closely related to students' psychological well-being (Everett, 2017). To understand the idea of belonging and student engagement at a deeper level, it is helpful to have framework for reference.

Wenger's social theory of learning helps to explain the importance of student engagement and why it is relevant to the concern of student retention and is framed by communities of practice theory (Nasuja & Jones, 2016). According to the communities of practice theory, learning involves active participation in activities with people and practices in social communities, construction of identities within the communities, and an individual's meaning making of the activities completed. These components play an important role in creating a sense of belonging and engaging students in the university culture and learning. Constructivist approaches to learning increase levels of engagement and are more prevalent when opportunities for active learning, social interaction, shared experiences, positive feedback and reflection are present (Everett, 2017). With this theory in mind, the next step to understanding student engagement is to identify the factors

involved to understand how participation in campus recreation facilitates the idea of sense of belonging and is a form of participating in a community of practice.

Campus Recreation

As a component of student affairs, campus recreation programs play a vital role in involving and incorporating students into campus life and aiding in the development of well-rounded students (Ward & Gryczynski, 2007). The university can provide support to its young adult students by promoting a sense of belonging and supporting a sense of worth, while creating a space where students feel comfortable and feel a sense of ownership (“The Campus Recreation”, 2009). In addition to these benefits, student organizations, such as campus recreation, provide the student with a structured framework and an atmosphere through which students can form new relationships (Ward & Gryczynski, 2007). Campus recreation works to include multiple factors into their programming that promote student engagement. These include an institutional commitment to the student as a whole, academic ability, university resource allocation, building of relationships between staff and students, student motivation, friendship, and balance of a healthy study/life balance. Social aspects play a key role in engagement and help to create a sense of belonging while providing support for students and contributing to better learning outcomes and increased retention. Peer support and involvement is one of the most influential factors on educational and personal development (Astin, 1996). Campus recreation can help foster these relationships through involvement in programs so that students have the opportunity to get involved with various activities and one another.

Campus recreation programming (e.g., intramural sports, fitness classes) is a valuable tool for students as the focus of these programs is to increase healthy habits and the academic success of a student through increasing engagement. Students are provided with ways that they can relax, relieve stress, renew their perspective and heighten their social relationships with others (Forrester, 2015; Henchy, 2011). Campus recreation centers also play a significant role in creating a sense of community for college students through programming that facilitates increased self-confidence, integration of different cultures, decreased student isolation, sense of belonging to the university, and trust in peers (Henchy, 2011). These resources on campus offer a place for students to form relationships with their peers while promoting their health and welfare. The significance of this current study lies in the potential to better understand the relationship between participation in campus recreation programming and success with student engagement practices.

Site Selection

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is a mid-size university, with approximately 23,000 enrolled students, located 30 miles southeast of Nashville, Tennessee that offers a wide variety of programs for bachelors, masters and doctoral level students, and is the largest producer of graduates in the Nashville area. The student body is made up of 52% female and 48% male students and 67% Caucasian students, with the African American and Asian students being the next most represented ethnicities. The freshman class makes up approximately 20% of the student population. MTSU is primarily a commuter school with only 27% of enrolled students living in university-owned buildings while the other 73% of students live in the local community or commute

from surrounding cities. The large commuter population is a unique characteristic of the university, which makes it challenging to get students engaged in programming opportunities. One of the departments which aim to increase involvement of all students is the campus recreation division of student affairs. The University's campus recreation department takes pride in their mission of complementing academic goals by encouraging physical, emotional, and social growth. MTSU's campus recreation is the only such university department in the area to offer a program specifically geared to their freshman students.

Freshman Fit is a program that Middle Tennessee State University's campus recreation department initiated in the Fall of 2016. The intention of the program is to introduce college freshman to the recreation center while helping them make strides in their health through small group fitness and mentorship. During the Fall of 2016, I became familiar with the program, administrators, personal trainers, and participants. While spending time with this program, I discovered that while beneficial, there are many changes that should be implemented so that the program can meet the needs of the freshman student along with the mission of the university. In order to make these changes beneficial, it is necessary to work with program participants to identify what barriers are present and how the participants make meaning around their behaviors and the associated barriers.

Methodology

To determine the function that campus recreation plays in the encouragement of student engagement and the development of sense of belonging at the university, it is necessary to evaluate campus recreation programming. Student engagement and sense of

belonging are complex phenomena that may have various meanings to those who experience them. These ideas need to be discussed in depth to uncover the meaning making processes of the participants so that the individuals' voices are heard and concerns are considered. Through their participation and interactions with one another, students construct their own meanings about their existence in the world and the relationships that exist within it.

This type of research is concerned with how people interpret their experience in the world in which they live (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2016). In the case of this study, qualitative research will be used to achieve a deeper understanding of student engagement practices and sense of belonging of students who participant in campus recreation programing, more specifically the Freshman Fit program, in order to improve the overall experience of the college student. One way to explore these concepts among campus recreation participants is by doing a program evaluation. Qualitative program evaluation is used to aid administrators in decision-making through the evaluation of processes and outcomes (Patton, 1990). Qualitative program evaluation allows the researcher to study the selected program and issues in depth and detail. Evaluation is applied research, which is different from academic research (Patton, 1990). The purpose of academic research is to generate theory and discover truth whereas the purpose of applied research is to inform action, enhance decision making, and apply knowledge. Applied evaluative research is useful in making interventions, such as the Freshman Fit program, more effective (Patton, 1990).

With qualitative research, we have an opportunity to examine details of everyday human behavior, emotion, and personality characteristics that we cannot always gather

with quantitative methods. Relationships created based on student engagement practices are best evaluated through the use of qualitative methods due to the constant interactions and personal beliefs involved. Meaning is constructed through the interactions between human beings and their world, and is developed and transmitted within social contexts (Crotty, 1998). The researcher strives to see things from the perspective of the participants and make meaning from their responses. This type of research can help to understand the how and why of student engagement practices and how it is seen in different light from multiple participants, perspectives that may never be heard otherwise.

This qualitative study used both open ended questionnaires and focus groups as the techniques for data collection and provided an opportunity for the researcher to understand the themes of the world from the participants' own perspective. Both open-ended questionnaires and focus groups allow for more elaborate responses to be extracted from the participant compared to conventional quantitative methods.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative program evaluation was to explore campus recreation programming, specifically Freshman Fit, and any associated student engagement behaviors. Specific areas that were explored were sense of belonging and social interactions. This qualitative program evaluation explored the participants' perceptions of the program as relates to their own engagement at the university and the role engagement plays in their defined success at the university. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do participants make meaning of the concept of engagement in a university setting (Leach, 2016)?

2. What relationship, if any, exists between Freshman Fit and the creation of sense of belonging at the university? How do participants interpret this relationship?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

College completion rates have moved to the forefront of US higher education efforts. Despite the fact that enrollment numbers are increasing, fewer than half of 2004 high school graduates have earned a college degree (Karp, 2015). There are multiple campaigns focused at ensuring college completion as it is commonly recognized that high school graduation is no longer sufficient for economic success. In order to help boost completion rates, professionals are working to find ways to better meet both the academic and non-academic needs of college students. For example, by increasing resources that address the students' health, it is believed to increase retention and graduation rates (Forrester, 2015; Hall, 2004; Ragheb & McKinney, 1993; Henchy 2013).

Student health is also recognized as an important part of the learning process and to the development of healthy and productive individuals, and it should not be separated from the physical, social, political, and cultural influences that affect students (Jackson & Weinstein, 1997). Campus recreation as a department, recognizes the importance that student health has in the overall college experience. Over time focus has moved from individual health status to community models due to the notion that individual focus may not be enough to create and sustain change. The ideal educational community will support intellectual and social growth of each of its members through purposefulness, openness, justice, discipline, caring and celebration (Jackson & Weinstein, 1997). Healthier learning environments, such as campus recreation programming communities, can help students to feel better both emotionally and physically, and these programs may

motivate students more to learn and improve in their academic endeavors by implementing student engagement practices.

Student engagement has been a major area of assessment for many universities due to its correlation to effectiveness, retention, and graduation rates. While college is a time for a teenager to make the transition into the role of a young adult, it is also a time of socialization, experimentation, and growth that can be accompanied with periods of stress, depression and loneliness, which all play a role in students' level of engagement. University administrators collaborate to make the college experience as beneficial and enjoyable as possible for students while decreasing the impressions of these negative side effects. Campus recreation, a department within student affairs, can play a vital role in increasing student engagement through programming and collaboration with other departments across the university and through communication with one another. Through programming, administrators hope to increase student engagement levels and create a sense of belonging amongst students. In order to better understand how students perceive the idea of engagement and if a relationship exists between campus recreation and sense of belonging, a thorough review of related literature is needed to provide a solid base of knowledge concerning engagement principles.

History of Student Engagement

As research has been completed, the meaning and applications of the definition of student engagement have evolved in order to accurately represent the multifaceted relationship between outcomes, students, and the time/effort relationship. An interest in how universities use their resources and arrange programs developed due to the steady decline of public funding for higher education, and student engagement was identified as

an important category when measuring the quality of education. Administrators' view of being successful switched from finances, having large research grants, and recruiting successful scholars to effectively enhancing involvement, teaching and learning (Astin, 1985). The Association of American Colleges and Universities suggests three key learning outcomes that are fundamental to the development of intentional, lifelong learners (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004). Students should become empowered through the development of both intellectual and practical skills. Through this process students must take responsibility for their own learning and their participation within social and civic processes while becoming informed citizens. Academics are now defining student success not as what they have, but what they do. College students' educational journey should not only include the formal academic curriculum, but also should include student life, collaborative programming, community and global experiences (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004). A brief recap of the development of this idea is necessary to understand the role student engagement plays in the college setting today (Kuh, 2001).

In 1985, Astin developed the theory of involvement, which helps to break down the impact of student involvement in non-academic organizations (Astin, 1985). The basic assumption of this theory is that as the amount of student involvement increases, the amount of learning that takes place will also increase. The core concepts of the theory are composed of three elements; inputs, environment, and outcomes. The first includes students' demographics, their background, and any previous experiences. Secondly, environment accounts for experience during college and lastly, outcomes encompass

students' characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college. In addition to these elements, there are five sections to Astin's theory of involvement, all of which are centered on the level of involvement and the benefits of student involvement in and out of class experiences. The first section notes that involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects and the objects may be highly generalized or highly specific, regardless of its object. The second and third sections describe that involvement occurs along a continuum, and that involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. Additionally, the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. Lastly, the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Astin, 1985). Some characteristics of a highly involved student are one who devotes a considerable amount of energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates in student organizations, and interacts with faculty members and other students frequently (Astin, 1985). Involvement is very similar to motivation, which is a common concept in psychology, with a few differences. Involvement is more assessable by direct observation and measurement as compared to motivation which is more of an abstract psychological term. This type of theoretical framework is a particularly helpful tool for universities in order to work towards a student-centered atmosphere and understanding student engagement.

The meaning and implementation of student engagement has evolved to represent the complex relationships between students' efforts, other campus activities and desired

outcomes related to college. In order to measure student engagement to improve teaching styles and learning in the classroom, several measurement tools were created to help measure student engagement and should be considered for future projects. These include, but are not limited to, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ), and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Pace (1980, 1984) developed the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) to measure quality of effort, which is the time and energy dedicated to certain tasks, and his research showed that students gained more from their studies and other aspects of college when they spent more time and energy on certain tasks that required more effort than other, such as studying, interacting with their peers, and applying their learning to specific situations (Kuh, 2009). In 1987, after more work was conducted in the field by Chickering and Gamson which identified high quality teaching practices that should be incorporated to increase student engagement including time on task, understanding of diverse learning styles, student-faculty relationships, and active learning (Kuh, 2009). Today the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is used to demonstrate that student engagement can be reliably measured across large numbers of institutions and that engagement data can be used by faculty and staff to improve the college experience (Kuh, 2009).

The NSSE program was founded on three core purposes, the first being to provide high-quality, actionable data that institutions can use to improve undergraduate experience. The second purpose is to discover more about and document effective educational practice by analyses of the results and research taken on by the NSSE. The third core purpose is to encourage institutions to report their performance on the NSSE

and other indicators of collegiate quality (Kuh, 2009). With these purposes in mind, NSSE provides high quality, behaviorally oriented data about the student experience that are related to student success. NSSE benchmarks include questions concerning level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment (Kuh, 2009). The idea of student engagement being used as a measurement tool for educational quality was a turning point for universities to identify whether if they were using their resources effectively, and assessing student outcomes and aspects of the campus environment associated with these outcomes to improve student learning and success (Ewell, 2008). This helped to refocus education on the importance of learning outcomes, versus the amount of attention that had been given to university rankings, and expand the environment in which these outcomes were used to improve student learning and success (Ewell & Jones, 1996; Gonyea & Kuh, 2009). Additionally, these findings could also be used to improve teaching styles and learning in the classroom.

Student engagement became a necessary practice due to the culture changes happening in higher education, and the focus of education had to make the shift from information transfer to identity development (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004). Although there were many influences to this culture change, only a few will be discussed to set a general framework for understanding. There was a democratization of higher education resulting in nearly universal access for students to be admitted to college, whether they could afford it or not. A shift in expectations concerning financial responsibility of students occurred and in relation to this there was a decrease in financial

support. Economic trends not only effected student finances, but also affected the job market, institutional finances, and resulted in governmental controls over college tuition and fees. In addition to these, college students themselves also played a role. There was a growing emphasis on adult learners, diverse students, and changing expectations (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004). As a result of these, plus many more, culture changes in higher education, and the new findings associated with student engagement, increased attention has been directed towards identifying the most effective strategies for engaging students, which may be easier said than done.

While increasing student engagement and simultaneously increasing graduation/retention rates seems ideal, there are a lot of components that must be considered. Administrators and faculty alike must consider the diverse populations that they are working with and must be willing to step away from their own agendas to meet the needs of the students. For the best outcomes to be achieved, collaboration among departments, and with students, must also occur. This may include collaboration among various student affairs departments or student affairs/academic departments. These collaborations will allow for the most resources and effort to be allocated for the students' benefit. Studies have found that the more students are involved in student affairs programs, the more successful they are when measured in health status and GPA. This is because behaviors related to their success are common modifiable behaviors engaged in on campus by many students, and student affairs officials have the opportunity to encourage, nurture, and support students' engagement in programs that encourage the behaviors identified as being related to success. Social participation is the

bedrock of learning and learning will take place as part of lived experience. Students need to feel encouraged, a sense of belonging, accepted, valued and included and these needs can be met through social participation (Masika & Jones, 2016). This argues against the idea that learning is an individual process in that learning as social participation involves participation in activities with people and aids in the construction of identities within these communities (Wegner, 2009). “Doing” creates relationships of identification with the community while experience shapes the development of identity as a learner or knower (Masika & Jones, 2016). Involved and committed students report having a positive educational experience (Duzevic, Mikulic & Bakovic, 2018). In order help promote these ideas administrators should be motivated to create environments that will increase interactions amongst students and staff and provide various activities that enable students to become involved. Student affairs programs help to create both social and lived experiences through group activities that foster student belonging and engagement. These professionals have an opportunity to encourage, nurture and support student engagement in programs that encourage the behaviors identified as being related to success (Becker, 2009). When creating programs, administrators and collaborators must consider all factors so that the student is being helped in the best way possible.

Understanding the history, evolution and importance of student engagement will help administrators and educators put this theory into practice in the higher education setting. By having a general understanding of how student engagement has evolved the framework of this research study has been laid out. Without understanding the development of this idea, a solid curriculum for the Freshman Fit program could not be developed, nor could the proper questions be asked during data collection.

Student Engagement Defined

Student engagement has moved into the spotlight as an important concept in education practices due to the correlation between student success and retention. Engagement has been found to be a major contributor for these concerns as student engagement helps to produce enhanced learning outcomes for students (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017; Leach, 2016). Student engagement encompasses what students and universities do, including what learning components are part of their programs, that leads to success in their learning. Student engagement, based on the theory of involvement, is an important concept because the more students participate and become involved in social and academic activities at the university, the more likely they are to persist with their studies, which leads to increased retention and graduation rates (Tinto, 1998).

Student engagement can be promoted through multiple methods and has several key factors (Weimer, 2012). Institutional commitment to student retention and engagement and the fostering of positive relationships between staff and students are two factors that promote student engagement. Academic ability, for example higher high school grades and study habits, predicts higher grades at the university level. Other factors include students' university preparedness, both academically and emotionally, student motivation and self-efficacy, friendship formation, and a balance of a healthy study/life balance with social support (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Nonacademic factors play an important role in the decision-making process as to whether or not a student will stay at a university, such as personal reasons, including difficulty in adjusting to the environment; fit with the university; finances; and social support (Everett, 2017).

Recognizing that no university will retain all of its students, programs should nonetheless

lead to the development of strategies and skills that foster personal success and responsibility in order to help students complete their programs of study (Kimbark, Peters & Richardson, 2017).

Professionals are also an important part of the engagement web as they must be sensitive to students' needs, approachable, and well prepared in order to increase students' commitment to the process (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Staff members who take the initiative to encourage learning and engagement with students, while keeping a positive attitude and building relationships, are able to prevent students from feeling a sense of isolation (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). By decreasing isolation, confidence and interpersonal skills will develop which will in turn promote persistence, retention and engagement (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson 2017). Students are more likely to participate in academic life when steps are taken by institutional staff to engage in meaningful communication with them, allowing students to experience enhanced learning and increased confidence and engagement (Ahlfeldt, Mehta & Sellnow, 2005; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson 2017). Staff relationships play a major role in student engagement and through them students become more involved and foster relationships of their own (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Staff who take steps to encourage a deep level of learning and engagement with students are able to help prevent students from developing a sense of alienation and in turn can increase the feeling of community.

In addition to community, positive forms of communication help to foster student engagement (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Students are more likely to engage with the university when they take responsibility for their own actions and are motivated to succeed, as motivation and self-efficacy are variables important for engagement.

Encouraging students to believe that they can learn from their own experiences and giving them control over the learning process helps them to develop confidence and enhance self-belief. When students are provided with opportunities to learn autonomously and with others, they are more likely to be motivated, engaged and successful. Through this process they feel that they are competent to achieve their own objectives.

The process of learning must also be considered and arranged so that students have the opportunity to reflect, question the information at hand, evaluate and make connections between ideas (Weimer, 2012). Learning must be active and collaborative, meaning that it fosters social skills and gives the students an opportunity to participate in decision making processes (Weimer, 2012). One way to improve student learning is to think about students as moving along a continuum from disengagement to engagement. Student engagement helps to produce enhanced learning outcomes for students, so administrators must be concerned about the type of activities in which students are participating. In short, student engagement looks at what students do that leads to success in their learning and also what the institutions are doing to promote this type of behavior. There are many different perspectives on engagement that influence the learning process, which include motivation, teacher/student relationships, peer relationships, perceived institutional support, outside support, behavioral, emotional, cognitive and belonging (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2014).

Belonging, an important part of learning, can be fostered by a range of academic and extracurricular programs and is considered a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged, as well as the feeling that they are an important part of

the university. Wenger's social theory of learning, which will be discussed in further detail later, helps to explain the importance of student engagement and why it is relevant to student retention. Additionally, it is framed by communities of practice, which helps to explain the importance of social and peer interactions amongst students. Wenger's concepts are able to be used to understand how people learn in various situations (Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay & Sieborger, 2008).

Belonging and Community

As a result of the shifting culture of higher education, attention has been drawn to effective strategies for increasing student engagement, which includes creating a community and sense of belonging. Belonging to the institution is an important factor for retention and is closely associated with engagement that can be fostered by a range of academic and extracurricular programs (Masika & Jones, 2015; Nasuja & Jones, 2016). Belonging is defined as a student sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and that they are an important part of the community (Thomas, 2012; Everett, 2017). In order to increase engagement, students need to feel welcome and that they belong at an institution (Weimer, 2012).

When students feel that they can identify with the university habits and culture they will be more comfortable engaging in multiple aspects of university life. Social aspects and the nature of relationships also influence student engagement (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Students learn better together and tend to form self-supporting groups. Through spending more time together, via group work, face-to face and online communication, students described improved quality of their learning (Nasuja & Jones, 2016). Friendship formation provides support for students, contributes to better learning

outcomes and increased retention. Students who get together outside of a specific class or activity, such as a membership to a peer community, are more likely to progress in their academic venture, feel more confident and develop a sense of belonging (Nasuja & Jones, 2016). It is the university's role to help foster these relationships, involvement and programs so that students have the opportunity to get involved with various activities and one another, which is where the idea of communities of practice comes into play.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP) play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and engaging students in learning (Masika & Jones, 2015). According to the CoP perspective, learning has to be placed in the context of lived experience and participation in the social world. Students tend to learn better together and form self-supporting groups when they are a part of a community (Tinto, 2003). CoP can arise in a variety of ways and occur when people engage in a common activity and learn together through this process (Herne, Adams, Atkinson, Dash & Jessell, 2013). Quality institutions that promote community help students develop a sense of belonging, in which students feel that the university acknowledges their needs and that they feel they are a valued member of the campus community. Additionally, students also tend to feel more confident about their role at the university and that they can influence, shape and control their experience (Jackson & Weinstein, 1997).

CoP support social theory of learning by focusing on sociality, relatedness, connectedness, learning together, and the idea that social participation is the bedrock of learning (Wegner, 2009). Wegner's (2009) social theory of learning is a multi-dimensional way of looking at learning in which learning occurs through active

participation in activities with people, construction of identities within these communities and meaning-making processes (Bandura, 1977; Masika & Jones, 2015). Wenger's concepts are able to be used to understand how people learn in various situations and suggests that engagement in social practices is the fundamental process by which we learn and how we create identity (Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay & Sieborger, 2008).

Within the concept of CoP there are four interconnected learning components, community, practice, meaning and identity. Community is related to learning and to belonging, and a community approach allows learners to deal with complexity, problem solve, and communicate with others who may have diverse views and background than their own (Masika & Jones, 2017; Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Engaging in activities and working together fosters relationships of identification with the community and helps to shape one's identity as a learner or knower (Wenger, 1998). Practice relates learning to active participation. Learning by experience relates to meaning while identity is described as making meaning of the learning process through social interactions (Masika & Jones, 2017). These components play an important role in creating a sense of belonging and engaging students in the university culture and learning by incorporating systems of relationships between people, activities and the world. Sense of belonging and engagement is derived from the meaning making process of college students and are more prevalent when opportunities for active learning, social interaction, shared experiences, positive feedback and reflection are present. CoP help to promote participation, which may not have occurred individually, and helps to create a sense of identity, a key component in learning (Everett, 2017; Strule & Craig, 2016; Masika &

Jones, 2017). CoP can be applied to many different areas of campus, including student health.

CoP have three distinct characteristics that separate them from a group of people and understanding these characteristics helps to develop a basic understanding for why the Freshman Fit program represents a CoP. There must contain a common domain, such as fitness and nutrition, in which membership implies a commitment and a shared competence that distinguishes the members of the CoP (Wenger, 2005). In the case of sport officials, individuals are committed to learning the rules of the game and how to apply them. Game rules, game control, and officiating mechanics define the domain of this CoP (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). The second characteristic, community, occurs when members engage in activities and discussions that enable individuals to share information, which in turn helps one another. Continuing the sports official example, each time a sport official works with another official, they gain valuable experience through interacting with and learning from one another (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). The Freshman Fit program allows for weekly group meetings where the participants can come together face to face, but also allows for more frequent communication through social media and personal cell phone use. The third characteristic of a CoP is practice. In addition to engagement, members must be practitioners meaning that they develop shared resources that may include experiences, stories, tools, and methods (Wenger, 2005). CoPs offer peer learning which can be more effective than traditional academic tracks. In order to understand the practice concept of CoPs better, it is helpful to return to the example of sports officials. Sport officials have the opportunity for officials to discuss their roles and offer advice to less experienced colleagues (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). In the Freshman

Fit program, participants are able to maximize learning by actively engaging in workouts and consulting with the personal trainers and nutrition counselors.

Departments that deal with student health at the college level are often at the periphery of campus life rather than at the center of it. Healthy communities are developed through professionals to create environments that promote healthy interactions among participants. Over time, focus has moved from individual health status to community models due to the notion that a focus on individuals may not be enough to create and sustain change (Jackson & Weinstein, 1997). This idea has challenged college professionals to have more of a community-oriented approach to their interventions. The ideal community will support intellectual and social growth of each of its members through purposefulness, openness, justice, discipline, caring and celebration. Through these communities students may be more motivated to learn, improve and achieve while also more confident in taking on both personal (such as health) and educational challenges. A programmatic emphasis on prevention, social interventions and community provides an opportunity for a community of practice where student health is a main focus (Jackson & Weinstein, 1997). In relation to the topic of student health, leisure time must be considered and can be wrapped into the CoP application. Leisure is essential to human endeavor and there is a need for leisure education, which occurs in a variety of settings, including campus recreation centers (Dunlap, 2011). Campus recreation allows for CoP, health, and leisure to all come together for the overall student experience.

CoP can specifically be applied to campus recreation programming to influence the health of the student. In order to achieve the domain characteristic, all professional

campus recreation staff members should be actively engaged with programming (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). In doing this, veteran programmers, such as program directors, can help to educate student employees, i.e. personal trainers, while also demonstrating commitment. Community characteristics can be carried out by encouraging participants, student employees, and professionals to engage with one another concerning campus recreation programming. These engagement opportunities allow for the sharing of knowledge and experience in an atmosphere that is comfortable. Lastly, the practice characteristic can be put to work by scheduling times where discussion can happen about areas of concerns and to address issues. A campus recreation program designed around the CoP framework will contribute to aid in participants' development and education while also bettering their experience (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007).

The Role of Campus Recreation

Campus recreation offers an opportunity for a community that focuses on health to form. The recreation center provides a physical location for community to form, opportunities for self-esteem to develop, social relationships to grow, and skills such as communication, leadership and problem-solving abilities to grow (Dalgran, 2001). Students can engage in habits that facilitate success while increasing a balance of physical, social and mental wellbeing. This type of programming has the unique capability of offering many of the factors identified as necessary to increase student engagement while promoting physical activity, which is also linked to student success. In order to successfully foster community, programmers must focus on teaching and learning, commitments to students and faculty that match the mission of the university,

freedom of expression, high standards of civility, respect for diversity and a code of conduct (Dalgran, 2001). By continuing to work with other departments on campus, the department of campus recreation can make strides in achieving the universities mission while helping to increase retention/graduation rates and helping the student grow individually.

Considering the above concepts, universities must work to include multiple factors that promote student engagement and create communities where students can learn and grow. Campus recreation is a division of student affairs that works to include these factors into its programming. These include institutional commitment to the student as a whole, academic ability, university resource allocation, building of relationships between staff and students, student motivation, friendship, and balance of a healthy study/life balance. Support is provided to meet the needs of young adult students, including the need for community by promoting a sense of belonging, and supporting a sense of worth, while creating a space where students feel comfortable and feel a sense of ownership (The Campus Recreation Sports Center: The New Student Union, 2009).

Student organizations provide the student with a structured framework and an atmosphere through which students can form new relationships (Ward & Gryczynski, 2007). Campus recreation programs, such as fitness programming, outdoor recreation and intramurals, play a vital role in involving and incorporating students in campus life, and aid in the development of well-rounded students. Campus recreation programming can provide students with resources they want and need to be successful, such as personal trainers, low cost gym memberships, education on equipment use, and social support through intramural and club sport activities (Greaney et al., 2009). Here the students can

relax, relieve stress, renew their perspective and heighten their social relationships with others (Forrester, 2015; Henchy, 2011). In addition to the psychological benefits, physical activity provides protection against unhealthy weight gain and an outlet for students to manage the effects of stressors of college life while also fighting against future chronic disease (Miller, Noland, Raynes, & Staten, 2008). Exercise has been shown to improve mood, improve cardiovascular health, decrease risks for chronic disease, increase strength, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve health-related quality of life (Weinstock, 2010). Additionally, there are several social benefits of student participation in campus recreation activities, which include improvement of self-confidence, integration of different cultures, decrease of student isolation, sense of belonging to the university, and trust in peers (Henchy, 2011).

Social benefits can be amplified through the development of and participation in a CoP type setting, such as Freshman Fit programming, that allows for programmers, participants, and campus recreation employees to work together in this setting. A CoP setting is supported by the idea that students will be more likely to visit the campus recreation center if they had a friend to go with (Stankowski, Trauntvein & Hall, 2017). Additionally, a CoP allows for information and knowledge to be exchanged amongst personal trainers and participants, which help students to better understand how to use the equipment and theories around health and fitness. This increase in knowledge can lead to an increase in confidence, causing increased visitation frequency (Stankowski, Trauntvein & Hall, 2017). Recreation participation has a direct relationship with developing a sense of community and belonging and plays an important role in friendship, socialization and physical activity (Hall, 2004; Henchy, 2011). These

resources on campus offer a place for students to form relationships with their peers while promoting their health and welfare and enhancing their experience at the university (Forrester, 2015). Research has shown the many benefits of campus recreation programming and these results indicate that a CoP within a program can help to ensure participants are getting the most out of the program.

First Year Students

While campus recreation and the principles mentioned above are beneficial for college students of all ages, this study focused on first year student experience. Specifically, this study focused on traditional first year students. The initial adjustment period for traditional first year students introduces a host of new experiences for students, which include academic, personal and social challenges. Academic challenges include time management, workload, learning study skills, and adjusting to new ways of learning and learning environments. Personal and social challenges arise as many students are away from home for the first time and include newly found independence, living with roommates, daily living activities, homesickness, self-efficacy and identity (Everett, 2017). Most freshmen reported experiencing homesickness, loneliness, shyness, and fear of failure or disapproval (Sevinc & Gizir, 2014). The primary focus of first year seminars or programs should include methods that engage student in the learning process and address their academic, personal and social needs.

Strong social networks contribute to a first-year students' academic performance as friendships help students quickly settle down and make progress with their studies (Katanis, 2000). When considering social adjustment, relationships with friends, participation to social activities, and leisure time management appeared to be the most

common factors that negatively affect the social adjustment of first-year university students (Sevinc & Gizir, 2014). Freshmen need social encouragement to be involved in extracurricular activities on campus.

There is a positive correlation between early engagements and success rates (Thalluri & King, 2009; Webster & Chan, 2009). Negative first year experiences can directly lead to failure or withdrawal from the university. Correlatively, early attention from university staff can increase positive experience and decrease withdrawal rates (Thalluri, 2016). Programming focused around first year student success allows for students to gain confidence that is required for success in higher education disciplines.

A narrative reflection project appeared to be a helpful tool when looking to gather information about freshman students' experiences while helping to increase their sense of connectedness. Through reflective writing, students' expressed thoughts about what they experienced during the week and this activity acted as a helpful tool in understanding how a first-year program helps to foster academic, personal and social engagement (Everett, 2017). Upon analysis the most common themes represented were related to food/diet/exercise and living arrangements. The key components noted were college food and the phenomenon of the freshman fifteen. Additionally, these narratives included descriptions of the responsibilities associated with independence and daily living activities. Social engagement was also a key theme represented in the students' narratives, showing the importance of friendships and socialization (Everett, 2017). Students felt that this project affected their personal well-being as they gained support and were able to see that they were not alone in what they were feeling and experiencing. This project demonstrates how a fitness education program geared towards freshman

students could be helpful in increasing community and sense of belonging while addressing health concerns (Everett, 2017).

While research shows that programs directed towards increasing first year student engagement to be beneficial, it is important to note students' personalities and use of time. Students allocate their time based on their individual preferences and constraints (Fosnacht, McCormick & Lerma, 2016). Understanding that how students use their time has important implications for their experience, institutions must extend effort to areas of curriculum structure, physical space, support services, expectations of students and co-curricular activities.

Moving Forward

With the help of many scholars, a general understanding of student engagement, sense of belonging and communities of practice has been established. Each of these components play a valuable role in the retention and success of college students. Building on information from previous research, this study will aim to enhance the understanding of how students perceive the idea of student engagement and the related concepts. Additionally, this study will also examine any relationship that exists between campus recreation and a student's sense of belonging at a university. Completing research in this area will contribute to understanding the processes of belonging and engagement in relation to student retention and success and to help campus recreation programming to be most beneficial to participants.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Significance of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to the explore students' participation in Freshman Fit, a campus recreation program focusing on first year health and community, and their level of engagement with the university related to this participation. Without a proper understanding of students' thought processes and behaviors, we are unable to create a program that would benefit students while meeting the retention goals and standards of the university. Among the many research methodologies available to explore these programs, I felt that a qualitative program evaluation was best suited to not only gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, needs and knowledge, but also to also help create a better experience for future participants.

Site Selection

Description of the University

Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is a mid-size university in the southeastern United States, with approximately 23,000 enrolled students, located 30 miles southeast of Nashville, Tennessee. The university offers a wide variety of programs for bachelors, masters and doctoral level students, and is the largest producer of graduates in the Nashville area. MTSU is primarily a commuter school with only 27% of enrolled students living in university owned buildings. The other 73% of students live in the local community or commute from surrounding cities. With a large commuter population, student affairs administrators have a greater challenge getting students involved in campus programming.

Campus Recreation

Situated on the east side of campus is the state of the art campus recreation center, which houses a 10,000 square foot weight room, a cardiovascular room, a functional fitness room, a lap pool, a functional fitness room, multiple aerobic rooms, an indoor soccer field, basketball courts, and a rock climbing wall. MTSU's Campus Recreation Department takes pride in their mission of complementing academic goals by encouraging physical, emotional, and social growth. The programming staff works together to create an experience for students which increases engagement while promoting healthy behaviors. The programming staff is made up of a program director, intramural coordinator, outdoor pursuits coordinator, fitness program supervisor, club sports director, adaptive recreation specialist and hourly employees such as personal trainers, trip guides, and facility staff. The campus recreation department offers a variety of programs to the student body. Within fitness programming, students have access to group fitness classes such as cycling, step and yoga, personal training sessions, and have access to the pool, cardiovascular room and multiple weight rooms. Outdoor pursuits offer a variety of opportunities for students to explore the outdoors through activities such as hiking, kayaking and white water rafting, while engaging with other students. The outdoor pursuits division also offers a rock climbing wall, equipment rental, and bike repair. Club sports and intramurals offer students an opportunity to participate in competitive athletic events without being involved in a varsity collegiate sport.

Freshman Fit

MTSU's Freshman Fit program's mission is to introduce college freshman to the recreation center in order to help them make strides in their health while providing a

support system through community. The Freshman Fit program curriculum was developed, with the suggestions of many scholars, into a comprehensive program during the summer of 2017. The curriculum was developed to be a multidisciplinary approach for college students to overcome barriers and enable healthy living (Bennett, Greene, & Schwartz-Barcott, 2012; Greaney et al. 2009). Along these lines, researchers noted that having a daily plan, creating goals, and having a team of support are all necessary components to enabling college students to be successful (Walsh, White & Greaney, 2009). Therefore, creating a sense of community and support was a main focus in the development of this program. Initially the program launched in September 2016 and had roughly 20 enrolled students. Participants were divided into smaller groups of four to five students and the groups were then distributed among three certified personal trainers. The groups were scheduled to meet once a week for a group workout and students were expected to continue their new learned habits on their own outside of the group. During this initial semester, I became familiar with the program, administrators, personal trainers, and participants. While spending time with this program, I discovered that while beneficial, there were many changes that should be implemented so that the program can meet the needs of freshman students, along with the mission of the university. Some components that were deemed necessary included nutrition counseling, collaboration with other departments across campus, and student engagement practices. After discussing this with campus recreation administrators at MTSU, we determined that having a detailed curriculum for personal trainers to follow would ensure students are obtaining specific learning outcomes, subsequently creating a purpose for this study.

Through collaboration, the Campus Recreation fitness director and researcher developed an outlined curriculum to aid in the structure of this program based on literature and CoP practices. Fitness (common domain), peer learning, shared knowledge and shared activity are all components that were carefully evaluated when creating this program. The program took place during the fall 2018 semester and was approximately ten weeks long. Each week the personal trainers created their workouts based on the guidelines in the curriculum (see appendix B). Additionally, the personal trainers were asked to include an educational component that teaches the participants about the benefits of the type of workout chosen. Throughout the semester, participants had the opportunity to participate in various individual and group challenges, which helped to increase participation and interaction among participants. In addition to the fitness component, the participants also had access to nutrition mentors who worked with them to increase nutrition knowledge while also helping to create an appropriate nutrition plan based on participant's goals.

Research Methodology

While surveys, and other quantitative methods, can provide a general picture of what people believe, qualitative research can give researchers an opportunity to get a deeper look into participants perceptions and beliefs (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). These methods allow researchers to dig a little deeper into responses in order to get a better understanding of how perceptions and meaning making processes make the world tick through a series of representations. This is done by exploring perceptions of human experience through personal interactions and studying things in their natural settings. Researchers attempt to make sense of the meanings people share and to understand

experiences and concepts through the participants' view. Qualitative research empowers participants to share their stories and make their voices heard.

The researcher's way of meaning making is also an important consideration when looking at qualitative research. The approach I take to making meaning of subjects is in the form of a constructionist, translating that meaning is not simply discovered, but it is created through an interaction of the subject and the object. There is no objective truth waiting to be discovered, but meaning comes into existence through engagement with the world, i.e., participants (Crotty, 1998). Meaning is always being constructed in this relationship, even if subconsciously and is an ongoing process. Through the evaluation process participants will share different information based on their own personal experience and the meaning they construct. The opportunities to explore and make meaning of new behaviors, routines and values are endless. Going into my research I may not be aware of precisely what data I will collect and what it will mean, but that is the beautiful aspect of qualitative research.

Looking a bit more specifically into qualitative methodology, a qualitative approach to program evaluation is used to gather information about the programs in order to evaluate their effectiveness. This method was chosen for this study because it gives the researcher an opportunity to not only explore the participant's perspective, but also to connect those perspectives to programmatic-level observations. With this type of evaluation connections can be made, which can then develop actions to change the program to address specific issues (Patton, 2015). A qualitative program evaluation offers a relational and social context by which to construct meaning from the perspective of those participating in the program itself, and allows participants to have a greater sense of

control over the process of providing feedback, e.g., the participant may suggest things that the administrator had not even considered, and as a result they are potentially more effective at identifying those things that are actually impacting participants' experiences. It provides the opportunity to put faces on the data to deepen understanding and inform decision making (Patton, 2015). It is worthy to note that although the participants' viewpoints are important to the success of a program, sometimes the participants do not know what's best for them or what will make them happy. This needs to be kept in mind when conducting the analysis of this project and to refer back to previous research to support the data.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation, the method that was used in this study, is the collection of information about activities, characteristics, and results of programs in order to improve outcomes, evaluate effectiveness and to make decisions about future programming (Patton, 2015). This qualitative program evaluation project of the Freshman Fit program took place throughout the fall 2018 semester. While this program has already been offered for several semesters, this qualitative program evaluation was necessary because as the program continues to develop and the need for evidence- based policies and best practices grow, it is necessary to make sure the program is effectively meeting both the needs of the participants and the university. This method was chosen, when compared to quantitative methods or routine monitoring, because qualitative program evaluation not only addresses what has occurred and what was accomplished, but why. Through this qualitative program evaluation, the goal was to understand how people involved with the program being studied understand, think about, make sense of, and manage situations in

their lives and environment in relation to their participation in this program. Additionally, this type of method helps to explain why a program has the effect that it does, which is also known as an outcomes evaluation, specifically referring to the results and impacts of the Freshman Fit programming.

Data Collection

Keeping the intention of the program in mind, multiple categories of data were considered in order to make the Freshman Fit program successful. Throughout this study information was gathered concerning participants' experiences, needs and goals. Several methods were used for data collection and generation.

Open-Ended Assessments

Open-ended questionnaires, a form of elicited texts, were used to collect data throughout the spring and fall semester. The purpose of using this form of elicited texts was with hope that they may provoke thoughts, feelings and concerns of the subject and it will give the researcher ideas about what structures and cultural values influence the participant (Charmaz, 2006, p36). One benefit of using this type of method to gather data is that an anonymous text allows for the participant to reveal things that they may not want to make during an interview or focus group. Some examples of areas that participants may not be comfortable discussing, but would be willing to share through writing include failures, shame, and other feelings. This method is a way to overcome the obstacle of fear of sharing, but it is important to keep in mind that not all participants possess the writing skills necessary to share these emotions and ideas (Charmaz, 2006).

This type of data collection tool works best when participants have a stake in the topic, experience in the area, and view the questions as significant (Charmaz, 2006).

Keeping this in mind, these questions were geared towards assessing the participants' experiences, their perceived level of engagement, and the role that their mentor played on their experience. This questionnaire was created specifically for this study after a thorough investigation of the literature and focuses on centralized ideas that promote student engagement (Weimer, 2012; Zepke & Leach, 2010). These ideas were associated with categories such as collaborative learning, diversity, quality of interactions, and sense of belonging. An example question from the collaborative learning category was "In what ways did your experience improve through the support of your group and leaders?" With regards to adversity, a sample question was "Did this program allow you to have interactions with students different than you?" One question from the quality of interaction section was "In what ways did working with your group motivate you to push towards your goals?" Sense of belonging questions included "Do you feel a part of the community at MTSU?" and "How does this programming help create that feeling?" Freshman Fit participants were given these assessments half way through the semester, coinciding with the week before fall break. Assessments were distributed during the week of 10/8/18 by the student leaders and personal trainers and were returned to the researcher once completed.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are often seen as a methodology that can provide results at low cost and within a minimum amount of time (Liamputtong, 2017). In contrast to interviews, focus groups tend to be informal and collective in nature, which can help promote an atmosphere that is comfortable and generates conversation. Through conversation the researcher can gather shared experiences and gain valuable contributions to the research

questions. The aim of focus groups is to gain understanding of the participant's meanings and interpretations of the subject at hand. The goal of these groups was not to reach a consensus on the discussed issues, but to generate a range of responses to help create better understanding of the attitudes, behavior, opinions and perceptions of the participants (Liamputtong, 2017).

Focus group sessions took place with Freshman Fit participants within their groups. The researcher facilitated these discussions using a guide. The guide was created using the same research used to create the questionnaire (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Weimer, 2012). Although this may seem redundant, conducting focus groups allowed the researcher to ask questions based off of participants' responses and also allow for participants to feed off one another's responses leading to deeper responses. Questionnaires do not allow for the possibility of following up on a statement, encouraging a response, or raising a question, all of which focus groups allow a researcher to do (Charmaz, 2006). Questions were structured around the participants' recent experience, their sense of belonging at the university, and community practices. Conversation was generated around the participants' experiences, noted obstacles, social dynamics and how programming can help them achieve their goals. Examples of questions that were asked include "How did your group members/Campus Recreation staff motivate you throughout the week?", "In what ways did working with your group motivate you to push towards your goals this week?" and "How did this community make you feel more a part of the university?" Focus groups were approximately 30 to 45 minutes long and took place at the end of the participants' semester. Freshman Fit focus

groups took place during their scheduled meeting time during the week of 11/12/18.

Focus groups were recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A benefit of using qualitative methods lies in the opportunity to understand the meaning of what the participants are expressing through storytelling and sharing their experiences. These methods allow for an in-depth data collection process, and later a comprehensive analysis while allowing for participants to have some influence over the direction of the discussion, possibly leading to unforeseen results. Qualitative data analysis, or transformation of the data, was inductive and thematic and looked at patterns and relationships amongst the data.

The analysis process began with audio recording and transcription of the focus group conversation, which provided a written record of the interview. Transcription allows researchers to share the information with others who may be interested in the data (Liamputtong, 2017). Both questions and answers were transcribed and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then conducted a thematic analysis by coding the transcriptions in order to find repeated patterns of meaning from the emic perspective. Coding is the naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. It is the first step in moving beyond the concrete statements found within the data and to making analytic interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of coding was to assemble a framework, or working skeleton, of the analysis. There were two main phases involved in the coding process. The first phase, called open or initial coding, involved naming each word, line or segment of the data and the second phase, known as focused codes, involved sorting of these

codes (Charmaz, 2006). Coding took place by asking myself specific questions related to the what, who, how and when of the interviews.

During this phase, findings were highlighted and displayed, and patterns were identified by reviewing transcriptions to identify common phrases, words and ideas. Participant feedback, quotes and paraphrases were used to code the data into themes and transcripts were read and coded openly in an effort to capture participants meaning making expressions. Similar codes were consolidated into fewer focused codes, which facilitated a second round of focused coding. Having completed focused coding, data segments were sorted and organized using focused codes, and a graphic representation of themes were created. Focused codes were used to construct analytic memos that used data to address the research question. Attention was given to the dynamic interaction of the group. It was important that through this whole process I remained open to all possible theoretical direction indicated by the reading of transcriptions and questionnaires. Once a thorough analysis had been completed, interpretation took place. During this phase of transformation of data, actual thinking processes occurred, and data was turned into information that will be used in the real world. Once the thorough analysis had been completed, comparisons across studies were completed during the interpretation process. Transcriptions were kept on a password protected computer and pseudonyms were given to protect patient information.

Trustworthiness

Through the data collection process, I made meaning of the findings and generated themes related to the data. It was important that I guard against preconceptions on the data throughout the process and this began by constructing and maintaining quality

throughout the life of a research project (Charmaz, 2006; Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & Pierreand, 2007). It is important to remember that qualitative data are interpretations made by researchers as they write up their observations and neither research participants nor researchers can be neutral due to the notion that meaning is always being constructed and is based off of one's own experiences (Freeman et al., 2007). A constructivist analysis pieces together and interprets implicit meanings and experiences and the meaning that the researcher assigns to these statements and actions (Charmaz, 2006). Preconceptions work their way into the way we think and write, so it is important to have safeguards in place to interpret the data properly (Charmaz, 2006). Invisible standpoints, such as class, race, and gender, may permeate an analysis without the researcher's awareness, but only become problematic when challenged (Charmaz, 2006). Although safe guards were in place, it is important to note that because neutrality was not an option due to construction of knowledge, that there is likely to be some discrepancy between interpretations. However, these preconceptions and construction of knowledge may not determine what we attend to and how we make sense of the data.

Because qualitative research is open to a great deal of interpretation, it was necessary to have strategies in place to be sure the data is properly interpreted and represented. This study was designed after a thorough review of the literature in order to limit personal preconceptions and beliefs. After this literature review was complete, research questions were developed and research tools were developed based upon recommendations of previous research. Upon entering the analysis portion of this project, it was necessary to be aware of theoretical concepts that may influenced the process. Ideas needed to earn their way into the analysis by doing analytic work first and asking

questions along the way (Charmaz, 2006). An example of a question that I asked myself was “Do these concepts help you understand what the data indicate? If so, how?”

Assertions were not included in the analysis unless the data supported it (Charmaz, 2006). During the process, it was important to keep in mind that by talking little, listening a lot, recording accurately, and reporting freely, less room for misinterpretation is present (Wolcott, 1999). One method that was practiced often in this study was peer review with the dissertation chair member. Additionally, member checking, sharing the data with participants for them to review, was used. However, only two participants were interested in this portion of the project. Even with these methods in place to ensure trustworthiness, it was my role as a researcher to work honestly through the entire research process and bring forth my findings and interpretations in hopes to create a better experience for the college student.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA

During the fall of 2018, the goal of the 10-week Freshman Fit program was to introduce freshman students to the recreation center, to teach them healthy habits that will transition with them over their college career, and to increase student engagement and sense of belonging. In order to accomplish these goals, a curriculum was developed based on previous research, personal trainers' insight, and participants' interest areas. A schedule was created to include three basic areas to cover each week: exercise, nutrition, and a weekly challenge (see appendix B). Each week the fitness graduate assistant would send out an educational email to the participants on the topic for the week and the personal trainers would also go over this topic during their weekly meeting (see appendix A). During weekly group sessions the personal trainer would be able to create their own workouts based on the curriculum and teach the students. For example, during week four the personal trainers educated participants on the basics of resistance training and the group workout for that week was focused around resistance training as well. The groups ranged from 3-4 participants and met for one hour once per week. Groups were also linked together via group text or GroupMe for communication outside of the weekly meetings. Participants also received an all access fitness pass which allowed them to attend group fitness classes at no additional cost for the semester. The first and last week consisted of a physical assessment which included of body fat measurement, a weigh in, a strength assessment and a cardiovascular assessment. Having these measurements helped participants create a baseline to measure their progress based on their personal goals. Registration fees for the program, which included weekly meetings, fitness pass, and access to nutrition counseling, were \$25. At the beginning of fall 2018 semester 43

students were registered and 25 of them participated in the meet and greet at the beginning of the semester. At the half way point of the program, 25 participants were participating in other campus recreation programs, such as intramurals or outdoor recreation, and at the end of the semester there were approximately 20 participants still attending weekly meetings. Participation week-to-week varied based on students' schedules and motivation.

After analyzing the questionnaires and focus group data, overall responses show that the program was successful in fulfilling its stated purpose. As discussed in the methodology, a program evaluation is the collection of information about activities, characteristics, and results of programs that can be used to evaluate effectiveness, improve outcomes, and make decisions about future programming. This evaluation of the Freshman Fit program will be used to make necessary changes in the program in order to continue to increase student engagement and sense of belonging for future freshman classes.

This program evaluation began by investigating the ways in which participants made sense of the concept of engagement in a university setting. Student engagement is defined as the time and energy students invest in purposeful activities and the effort put forth by the institution that lead students to success (Leach, 2016). By understanding how students make meaning of the concepts of engagement and success, programmers and administrators will be better able to meet the needs of the students. Through talking with students during focus groups and examining their responses from the questionnaire, several themes were revealed. Participants primarily identified engagement as being *involved* and *included*. Freshman participants recognized that being engaged as a student

required involvement on their part, but they also recognized that the university plays a role as well. The university plays an important role in creating a sense of inclusion and participants felt that the being included was an important concept when talking about the term engagement. More specifically, participants defined engagement as getting involved with affairs, making connections with others, and feeling like part of a group.

Three themes were created around participants meaning making of engagement: involved, included, and interactions. A brief glimpse at these focus codes compared to the definition of engagement shows that students understand the basic assumptions of the definition. It is imperative, however, to explore participants responses to truly understand how they make meaning of the concept.

Involvement

The first component of engagement, a prevalent one, was involvement. By definition, engagement requires involvement of both the student and the institution. During a focus group conversation Timothy shared that his understanding of engagement is “getting people involved with different stuff on campus” while Robbie explained that engagement is “involvement and activity.” John shared that he viewed engagement as “getting involved with stuff on campus.” Similarly, James said “it is like getting people involved with different stuff on campus.” Samantha explained that “being involved is one of the most important ways to do that.” Samantha’s response shows that she recognizes that engagement does not just happen without effort. She suggests through her response that engagement will happen when a person gets involved and Freshman Fit offered many opportunities for participants to get involved in both fitness and nutrition aspects. Examples of ways that students were encouraged to get involved were to participate in

group fitness classes, weekly meetings, and nutrition education sessions. Participation in Freshman Fit was voluntary, which was an important component of student engagement and shows at least a basic level of interest in what they are doing. Interest and enjoyment are important factors of program retention. Students are given the opportunity to sign up prior to the start of, or at the beginning of, a semester and then assigned to a group with a personal trainer creating an immediate opportunity to be involved with others in a social atmosphere that promotes learning together. As part of their signup fee participants are given an all access pass for fitness classes. This is another opportunity where students need to make an effort to be involved. At these group fitness classes students are given the opportunity to engage with another group of students, not necessarily freshman, and another fitness professional. Another student, Ashley, shared through the questionnaire that they understand engagement as “engaging in an activity or program you are actively involved, and it is something that interests you.” This student believes that in order to be engaged in something there must also be a certain level of interest involved. Teresa shared “that if you aren’t enjoying what you are doing then you will not come back.” Noting that Freshman Fit is a voluntary program, one may assume that participants had a base level of interest in fitness and nutrition aspects. With this assumption it is possible that this common ground influenced responses and initial involvement of the program. Additionally, with students having an interest in what they are doing, they are more likely to be engaged in the program as internal motivation is higher. This assumption is further supported by going through the initial applications that the participants filled out before the program started. When the participants filled out their initial application materials for the program they were asked to share their personal goals. When looking at these goals

collaboratively, many of the students had similar goals and interests and having a common ground helped these students to connect. Examples of these goals include weight loss, increase strength, better their health, and create consistency in healthy habits.

Being Included

The second component of engagement for students is being included in social groups at the university. Compared to involvement, being included is not specifically noted in the traditional definition of engagement, making this finding particularly interesting. In short, participants related their engagement to their sense of being included. When asked about engagement students offered the following responses “feeling like you are a part,” “actually be included,” and “feeling more part of the group (and campus too).” It is important to note here that included can be related to sense of belonging, which will be visited later in this analysis and discussed more thoroughly. These responses demonstrated the level of importance that freshman students gave to relationships as they relate to engagement practices. Interactions with professionals are important to the engagement web and making students feel included. Jaron said “having my trainer contact me every day” promoted engagement. Lexi said “engaging with the trainer, workout partner, and the nutritionist was important to maximize the experience.” Additionally, several students appreciated when the personal trainers and staff reached out to them outside of group.

Interactions

The third theme, interactions, also demonstrates the importance of relationships. Teresa defined engagement as “interactions with someone or something” and then further went on to discuss that “being in contact with people” is how you “make the most out of

what you are doing.” Freshman Fit gave students the opportunity to have an immediate group of people to interact and learn with. Without this group opportunity students may never have interacted with professionals or other students while visiting the campus recreation center.

Students felt that interactions were important because it made them more comfortable, which affected their experience. While being comfortable may not seem important on surface level, Cheryl’s justification for being comfortable helps to explain why being comfortable effects experience in a necessary way. She shared that “if you feel like you are part of that environment, you will be more comfortable and more willing to be involved.” This aligns with the idea that freshman year is a big transition and there are a lot of moving components that may make a student uncomfortable. Having a program in place that increases a student’s comfort level seems to be important to these freshman students. In addition to increasing comfortability, respondents noted that engagement is important because engagement helps to increase enjoyment, builds motivation and increases success. Ashley said “I think engagement is important because if you are not engaged or do not enjoy what you are doing then you will not come back.” Josh said “if you are not engaged or enjoying what you are doing then you will not be successful.” Lexi said “I think it is important to be engaged in the program because you will get the full experience, especially if you are enjoying it.” Considering motivation, Amy said “engagement builds confidence and motivation.” Many of the Freshman Fit participants mentioned that having contact with their personal trainer and group members helped to motivate them and increase engagement. By doing activities together participants felt that they became more comfortable at the campus recreation center and that they made new

connections. Sacha said “we were in groups and all freshman, so we connected.” Mandi said “if you feel like you're a part of that environment you'll be more comfortable and more willing to be more involved.” Teresa said “made me want to meet new people and understand different points of view.”

They also became more comfortable with teamwork practices and felt that they became more motivated and comfortable outside of the recreation center when working with other students. Michael said “I met so many people in the locker room and stuff, so it's really pushed me to be more talkative in the gym and outside of the gym.” Several students shared that they learned teamwork through their group interactions. Josh said “I do not really like group things, so this pushed me to do teamwork.” Similarly, Anna said “teamwork is definitely awesome.” This transfer from campus recreation programming to academic involvement is a positive one. This supports the idea that Freshman Fit is a co-curricular program and is benefiting students outside of their participation in the program.

Overall participants defined engagement as being involved, feeling included, and having interactions with others. Students described that getting involved took effort on their part and the institutions, which occurred through the campus recreation staff's effort, and that being interested in the program and having common goals as their groupmates helped to increase their desire to be involved. Feeling included was another way that students defined engagement. Participants noted that having someone show interest in their well-being in and outside of group played an important role in them feeling included. Lastly, participants defined engagement as having interactions with others. While understanding that students define engagement as being involved, feeling

included, and having interactions with others, it is necessary to examine what parts of the program contributed to these understandings.

Engagement Indicators

Given a general idea of how students define engagement, it is helpful to examine how they responded to the specific engagement indicators (EIs) that were built into Freshman Fit. The program deliberately sought to foster engagement through the indicators of collaborative learning, quality interactions with staff, and creating a supportive environment. Although not asked directly on their thoughts of each of these components, questions were generated around these ideas and participants responded to the questions asked and the responses surrounding these indicators of engagement help to reveal how students make meaning of the idea of engagement and their experience. Through a brief look at these three EIs, the data reveals that participants benefitted from the inclusion of these concepts.

The three EIs that Freshman Fit focused on were collaborative learning, quality interactions with peers and staff, and creating a supportive environment. The first of these, ‘collaborating with peers in solving problems or mastering material’ was employed because it deepens understanding and prepares students to deal problems they encounter during and after college (NSSE, 2019). Collaborative learning was encouraged through group meetings and nutrition education sessions. Participants were encouraged to learn new skills together weekly during their group meeting time.

When looking at the collaborative learning indicator, participants recognized the benefits of working together and having support from other participants. When referencing collaborative learning Morgan stated “it definitely helps having someone

there to motivate you and make sure you're doing the right thing and keeping you on track. Because now I am able to go by myself. But at first on the times when she would cancel, I would not go.” Morgan is referencing her groupmate that she made a connection with. When looking specifically at learning new workouts, one student shared “we kind of had to learn together and figure it out.” This type of group work gave students an opportunity to work together and problem solve in ways that they may have not been able to do individually. Accountability and motivation were also prevalent topics when discussing collaborative learning and play a significant role in learning. Sadie shared that it was “encouraging to have the same goals as somebody else, but also it gave you accountability.” Steven wrote “Doing it with other people helps keep me accountable and motivated to do it,” and when motivation is high more learning is likely to take place. Similarly, Sara shared “it definitely gave me accountability because then I had to show up for my group members.” These ideas are closely related to the quality of interactions the students were having with their groupmates.

‘Quality interactions’ was the second EI employed by the program, and the intent was to motivate students and encourage them to persevere towards the individual goals that they identified at the beginning of the semester during their application process. Quality interactions are important because college environments characterized by positive interpersonal relations promote student learning and success. Students who enjoy supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff are better able to find assistance when needed and learn from and with those around them (NSSE, 2019). Quality interactions were maintained through small groups which consisted of three to four members and communication outside of weekly group meetings. Both interactions

between participants and interactions between personal trainers and participants were an important component of the Freshman Fit experience. When referring to their fellow group members, participants shared that they always felt encouraged and were constantly reminded to keep pushing towards their goals when they wanted to give up. When asked about how these interactions helped, Adam said that they “encouraged us and motivated us to do our best even when we felt like we were struggling and wanted to quit.” Alyssa said “it was kind of like we were a community because we were all doing the same thing.” Each personal trainer played a vital role in the experience the participants and groups had by creating a positive environment where students were motivated and learned confidence in their new skills while feeling comfortable interacting with their peers. When asked how the personal trainer helped to encourage quality interactions, Steve said “our trainer wanted us to do our best” and Lisa shared “he was really encouraging.” The interactions between the personal trainer and the participants allowed for learning to occur, increased motivation, and encouragement to finish.

Related to quality interactions, the element of ‘supportive environment’ helped to promote a positive experience and students identified comfort, positivity, and encouragement as benefits of a supportive environment. Supportive environments provide support and involvement across a variety of domains, including the cognitive, social, and physical and foster higher levels of student performance and satisfaction (NSSE, 2019). These environments were created by the personal trainers, nutrition counselors, and campus recreation staff. Mentors worked to be supportive and motivating and be a resource for the students while encouraging participants to lean on one another for support and motivation as well. AG wrote “their positivity made me not what to give

up. They always have something good to say” when talking about their personal trainer. James shared that “my trainer knows that each of us have different strengths and weaknesses, so we all work together for the best outcome for each of us individually.” Anna said “I was able to confide in my trainer about my insecurities.” She also said “I never felt like I was out of place or that I did not belong.” Both Steve and Jason agreed that they “always felt very encouraged.” Jessica wrote that the group interactions provided a lot of opportunities where she could grow and learn. Always feeling included, encouraged, and a sense of belonging were all common topics when discussing Freshman Fit as a supportive environment. Sara said “I never felt like I was out of place or like I did not belong.”

Through the Freshman Fit program, students were introduced to basic fitness components and given the opportunity to interact with peers while learning new things and building healthy habits. Analysis revealed that students understand engagement as *being included, being involved, and having interactions*. They shared that this was important because it allowed them to become more comfortable which allowed them to learn more and benefit from what the program had to offer. Participants understood that not only does engagement happen when they make an effort, but when someone else invests in their well-being as well. Participant effort was demonstrated through voluntary and weekly participation while institution effort was demonstrated through the personal trainers’ investment in the participants. Having common interests, goals, and characteristics, that were discovered through the application process, were identified as positive correlations to engagement according to participant responses. The Freshman Fit program allowed for these students to have an immediate opportunity to engage with

other freshman students who are working towards fitness goals and have a desire to learn new healthy habits. These interactions were encouraged through weekly meetings and out of group communication.

The program started with 43 participants and about half of these participants fully completed the program. Ninety percent of the students who finished the program said they were fully invested in their journey while the remaining students shared that they could have put more time and effort into their participation. Approximately half of the participants also got involved in other campus recreation programming while participation in the Freshman Fit program. The majority of the students shared that they had learned new skills, how to eat healthier, were more aware of their overall health, and felt comfortable in the recreation center after participating in this program. The data suggests that the Freshman Fit program was successful in accomplishing the goals set forth by the department. In addition, Freshman Fit was beneficial in increasing engagement in student participants, and the program components correlate with students' definition and description of engagement. The data also suggests that participants felt that the program helped to create a sense of belonging at the university.

Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging has been shown to be a factor when increasing engagement amongst students. Belonging is defined as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and that they are an important part of the community (Thomas, 2012; Everett, 2017). The goal of Freshman Fit was to teach students healthy habits that they can use throughout their college career and to make students feel comfortable and welcome at the recreation center and on campus. Sense of

belonging plays a role in how students make meaning of engagement: *being included*, *being involved*, and *having interactions*. All three of these themes are influenced by a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers and that they are part of the community. In order to feel engaged, based on a student's definition, the components of sense of belonging need to be met as well and it is necessary that programmers take action in including these components into their programming. This initial look at the data suggests that there is a connection between participation in Freshman Fit and the creation of sense of belonging.

When asked to underline what concepts students could relate to when reflecting on the Freshman Fit program, eight out of eleven students shared that they felt accepted, valued, included, and encouraged. The other three students shared that they felt three out of the four concepts. When asked how campus recreation programming helped to promote these ideas, answers varied. Becki wrote "they keep you included and make sure you feel welcome and that you belong." Amy wrote the program gave her a sense of belonging "by giving us a safe space to be social, competitive, and work hard to better ourselves." Steve shared that "campus rec promotes these ideas by never putting you down. Never discouraging you." Sacha commented "by being in Freshman Fit and meeting new people. Everyone is always super nice." Teresa shared that "campus recreation allows you to be encouraged/valued through follow-ups from various outlets in the program. You also are included and accepted because anyone can participate." Kristin, Jaron, Donovan, Alexis, Sadie and James all had similar responses to how the Freshman Fit program helped to promote these ideas. These responses from students

demonstrate that the participants felt accepted, valued, included, and encouraged throughout the program and these are all important components of sense of belonging.

When asked if this program helped to create a sense of belonging, participants explained that they felt that their personal trainers and group members cared for them and this helped to create this feeling of belonging. They felt cared for through the extra effort that the personal trainers gave to them outside of group. Amy shared that the program helped to increase a sense of belonging because “if we don't show up then [the trainer] checks on us and it shows genuine concern.” Sacha also shared that she felt cared for and that it helped to promote a sense of belonging when the personal trainers and group members reached out to her if she missed group because she was sick. These interactions helped to create a sense of belonging for these participants. Freshman Fit also helped to create a sense of belonging by allowing students to not feel alone on their fitness journey. Having someone there for accountability and support was notable important components to these students. During a focus group conversation Bella shared,

I realized that other people are here and they're trying to accomplish the same stuff with me. Maybe not like the exact same goals, but we're both, we're all, trying to get a further in our fitness journey and I think being around people with that same thing and like came here to get help with that. It was really cool.

Tiffany, another participant, also noted that it was encouraging to be around other people on a fitness journey because the campus was so big, and it helped having a group to connect with. Along with feeling cared for and not being alone on their fitness journey, having a sense of ownership was an important component in increasing belonging for the participants. Adam said “it was something I could get involved in with other people on

campus at MTSU doing things together that we felt like we could call our own, I guess, and take pride in a little bit and to motivate each other.” Feeling cared for, not being alone, and having a sense of ownership all played a role in creating a sense of belonging for the participants.

Participants’ responses indicate that the program was successful in helping to create a sense of belonging; when digging deeper through dialogue and written responses, students shared specifically how they felt the program helped to create this and why it was important. AG said,

I think sense of belonging is really important because if you go somewhere and you are not feeling integrated into that community, I guess you are going to be like, oh you don't get out and do anything and get involved in stuff. At college when you come you are just going to be bored all the time and you are going to be like, do I really have a purpose here? Do I belong here? And maybe I should go somewhere else or something, you know. So, I think that it is really important.

AG’s response demonstrates that students recognize that sense of belonging is important to their college experience and that sense of belonging comes from getting involved and being part of a community. Having a sense of belonging is important in giving experience value and purpose. Making connections and becoming comfortable were two main areas on how this program was successful in this goal. Several students indicated that being in the recreation center and interacting with other students made it easier to connect with and form relationships with peers. Michael shared “I do feel like part of the community and being in the rec center a lot helps me meet more people and connect with others easier.” Having a safe place to meet new people and form friendships made these

students feel that they were a part of campus. Teresa shared “just being around the rec center and seeing other people and not just being somewhere off in my own and just seeing everyone around me, we feel like that was a part of the campus.” Through the questionnaire, Sarah shared “I do feel like part of the community and being in the rec center a lot helps me meet more people and connect with others easier.” Mark shared that by meeting other freshman, he felt welcomed and that he belonged. Increasing comfort levels was another way Freshman Fit helped to create a sense of belonging. Students shared that because they felt comfortable at the recreation center that they felt comfortable at other places on campus as well. Being comfortable at the recreation center gave them confidence to go out to other places on campus and connect with others.

Additional Findings

Participants were given an opportunity in both the questionnaire and focus group discussions to give any additional feedback that they had. While these responses varied, several student responses are important to note in regard to program evaluation. Maya said that this program “made me fall in love with working out again.” Jaron shared that “it gave me so much more confidence to do stuff that I have never done before.” James said “it has definitely contributed to the growth part. I think if someone ever asks me about my college experience, I would definitely mention Freshman Fit because it was one of the first groups that I got into when I got to campus and it was because it was already there set in stone.” Brittney said “this program has definitely set me up to still workout on my own.” Although these responses were not directly related to the research question, they are important to consider in regards to the success of the program and how the participants make meaning in relation to the program and their freshman year experience.

Without being asked specifically about their experience these participants shared the direct influence this program had on them and how it shaped their habits, experience, and personal growth.

Also, outside of the designed research questions, there was another set of data that is worthy of analyzation. During focus group meetings, participants were asked how they would define success as a college student. Participants defined being successful multiple ways and are represented through several themes: good grades, achieving personal goals, dealing with the emotional strains of college, balance, enjoying the process, personal growth and social connections. In reference to getting good grades, Anna said that she defined success as “making straight A’s” while several other students simply said “getting good grades.” Achieving personal goals was represented by Steve response in which he stated “obtain and reach whatever goal you set for yourself and do everything you can do accomplish it.” Alexis shared that she defined success as “being able to deal with stress and stay on top of everything.” The theme of balance is represented through several student responses. Students shared that they defined student success as “going to the gym,” “eating healthy,” “having a schedule,” and “getting enough sleep.” Enjoying the process deemed itself an important component of how students defined success. Rudy shared “being successful is enjoying what you love.” Five students shared that they thought that personal growth was a component of having a successful college experience. These responses varied from stepping out of one’s comfort zone, to trying the best you can, to being someone different when they graduated. Bethany shared “the real success is stepping out of your comfort zone and you kind of want to be someone different when you leave.” The final theme represented through participants definition of success was

social connections, which was discovered through Stacey's response: "making good connections with other people." It is important to note that this theme correlates with the themes discussed above when looking at engagement and sense of belonging. Social connections are an important part of success to students and the Freshman Fit program creates an atmosphere where social connections can take place around a common activity and interest. These findings are noteworthy because if it is understood how students define success, then universities can help meet these expectations of the students.

Participants' responses demonstrate that the program was successful in helping to create a sense of belonging at the university. Students shared that having a group that they could relate with, someone who invested in them and having a safe space to learn and explore helped to create this feeling. Freshman Fit participants also shared that they believed that sense of belonging was important to their experience. When students feel that they belong, they are more likely to get involved, feel included, and have quality interactions which in turn will increase engagement. Creating a sense of belonging is an important concept of this program and helps students to pursue the goals that they set for themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION

This program evaluation, which was outcome focused, helped to explain what effect Freshman Fit had on the participants and how the participants made sense of the program in relation to their freshman experience. This study was meant to be a collection of information about activities, characteristics, and results of the program in order to improve outcomes, evaluate effectiveness and to make decisions about future programming (Patton, 2015). Data collection and analysis show that the program was successful in helping participants reach the desired outcomes set forth by the campus recreation department. In addition to taking a look at the program itself, research questions were addressed. Analysis allowed for a general understanding of how students make sense of the term engagement and the role that sense of belonging plays in their experience.

Student engagement looks at what students do that leads to success in their learning. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defines student engagement as the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Leach, 2016). The participants of this program defined engagement as *being involved*, *being included*, and *having interactions*. All three of these defining factors identified by students are social experiences and are important in the learning process. These social experiences helped participants to make the most out of their involvement in the program. Students noted that effort, from them and the campus recreation staff, was necessary to experience engagement. These three identifying themes of engagement noted by the participants created a well-rounded experience for the student. Programmers need to keep these ideas

in mind when creating programs for students, not necessarily only for freshman. Faculty and staff play an important role in participants' experience, therefore their level of interaction with the participants needs to be considered during the development and execution periods. Programmers need to work together to make sure students are involved and that they have quality interactions during sessions in order to increase engagement. In terms of program evaluation, making this a collaborative process will lead to more productive programs and better outcomes. The peer-peer relationships, the staff-student relationships, the attitudes of staff, and efforts of both staff and students decreased isolation also promoted a sense of belonging for the participants. Examining these results in comparison to previous research allows researchers to make sense of these students' responses and their experience with the Freshman Fit program along with assisting with future program design.

Social Connections: Being Involved, Being Included, Having Interactions

These three themes identified through the data demonstrate how participants define the term engagement and how it influenced their participation in the program. Freshman Fit demonstrated institutional (department) commitment to student retention and engagement and the fostering of positive relationships between staff and students through small groups in order to promote student engagement. Other factors supported by previous research that were apparent from participants' responses include students' motivation, friendship formation, and a balance of a healthy study/life balance with social support (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Larmer and Ingamells (2010) found that a first-year learning environment increased a sense of connectedness amongst participants.

Engagement with staff throughout the week strengthened student-staff relationships, and

these environments also increased sense of community, which made participants feel that they fit well at the university. Larmer and Ingamells' (2010) study also showed that first year learning environments increase sense of capability, sense of purpose, sense of resourcefulness, and overall satisfaction, which increases the likelihood that students will complete their degree. Freshman Fit aims to be a well-rounded program that prepares students for their college career in multiple ways. At the transitional phase of freshman year, students' level of preparedness for university is just as important as their academic ability (Larmer & Ingammells, 2010).

These social connections are represented through the terms active and collaborative learning. The strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development are students' peer groups (Astin, 1996). Astin (1996) states that the extent of students' interaction with peer groups has potential for influencing all aspects of students' educational and personal development. These connections are important to learning as learning must foster social skills and give the students an opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, meaning both active and collaborative (Astin, 1996; Kuh, 2009; NSSE, 2018). Kuh (2009) states that both institutions and students have roles to play in creating the conditions for engagement and for taking advantage of engagement opportunities. Giving students an opportunity to discuss what they are learning and how it relates to their entire college career gives students practice in reflecting on and integrating their experience. These discussions help students to develop the capacity for deep, integrative learning, which will set them up for lifetime learning and personal development (Kuh, 2009). In the present study, small group programming, both fitness and nutrition, gave Freshman Fit students an

opportunity to learn together in a safe atmosphere that encouraged new friendships to form.

In addition to new social connections, small group activities encouraged agency. Students were given the opportunity to help with the decision-making process through the initial application process and by having the ability to give the personal trainers and the program coordinator feedback and suggestions throughout the semester. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions and ask for help during their sessions. By giving students an opportunity to be part of the process, programmers are encouraging agentic engagement that plays an important role in the larger student engagement umbrella. In doing so, students intentionally and somewhat proactively try to personalize what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Examples of situations that promote agentic engagement include giving students an opportunity to offer input, express a preference, ask a question, communicate what they are thinking and needing, recommend a goal or objective to be pursued, communicate their level of interest, seek ways to add personal relevance to the lesson, seek clarification, or request assistance (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Reeve and Tseng (2011) found that students are able to find ways to improve their learning enhance their experience through intentional, proactive and constructive acts. Freshman Fit gave students an opportunity to work together collaboratively while also contributing to the process. One way participants worked together collaboratively was through the small group programming. Students are given the opportunity to learn a different type of workout each week based on the curriculum provided to the personal trainers. Learning during these groups took place through direct exposure and experience. These activities

create an opportunity for identity development and for change in the ways that students perceive their role and contribution to the university and society.

Staff-student relationships play an important role in these small groups and to the contribution of participant's meaning making of the term engagement. These relationships with the campus recreation staff members played an important role in the development of these three themes. The staff members encouraged interactions, motivated students, and created a positive atmosphere for learning to take place. These results are supported by previous research that identified that staff members who take the initiative, or put forth effort, to encourage learning and engagement with students, while keeping a positive attitude and building relationships, are able to prevent students from feeling a sense of isolation (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010). Larmar and Ingamells (2010) found that these types of environments help students to connect with key staff within the school and identify supportive infrastructures. Becker, Cooper, Atkins and Martin (2009) found that when looking at success as improved health and better academic performance, professionals have an opportunity to encourage, nurture, and support students' engagement in programs that encourage behaviors related to success. Due to the importance of staff and student interactions, these relationships were considered when creating the Freshman Fit program. The groups were kept smaller to ensure that participants can connect with their personal trainers on a more personal level and to always feel included. Small groups were also used to help promote deeper relationships amongst participants.

Students defined engagement as being included, being involved and having interactions. The participants shared that the Freshman Fit program encouraged

engagement by getting them involved with one another, encouraging relationships in and outside of group, and having staff members pour into them. Masika and Jones (2016) found that their participants make meaning of their experiences through communication and group work facilitated belonging, doing, and experiencing, and that participants described being part of a community helpful to their learning process. Having interactions through sharing goals, working as a team, and helping each other help to increase engagement and community (Masika & Jones, 2016). Masika and Jones' (2016) study found that students felt that being involved with one another through group work improved their perceived quality of learning. Previous literature and participant's interpretation of engagement suggests that engagement goes beyond simply involvement, but also includes action. With the help of previous research and through analysis a clearer understanding of what engagement means to the students was obtained, but to truly understand if this program was successful in increasing engagement it is also necessary to look at how prevalent the engagement indicators were.

Engagement Indicators

Engagement Indicators (EIs) provide valuable information about distinct aspects of student engagement (NSSE, 2019). The three EIs that were included in the development of Freshman Fit were collaborative learning, quality interactions with peers and staff, and creating a supportive environment. A quick comparison allows similarity to be seen between these three EIs and participants definition of engagement.

Collaborative learning was encouraged through group meetings and nutrition education sessions. NSSE (2019) described collaborative learning as cooperating with peers in order to solve problems or master difficult material, which deepens

understanding and prepares students to deal with the problems that they will encounter during and after college. Examples of collaborative learning described by NSSE include working on group projects, asking others for help with difficult material or explaining it to others, and working through course material together (2019). Freshman Fit participants recognized the benefits of working together and having support from other participants. Comparing to this definition, small groups allowed students to work with their peers to master difficult material, they were able to help one another learn the new skills and also ask their personal trainers for help. These interactions motivated them and gave them accountability. Students were able to learn new information together, as outlined in the curriculum, and were encouraged to take what they learned in the campus recreation center and apply it to their daily lives. For example, students were encouraged through challenges to attend the campus recreation center three extra times per week or to walk to class instead of riding the bus. When considering nutrition knowledge, students were encouraged to make healthy decisions in the dining hall and student union by applying what they learned during their meetings. Collaborative learning is imperative and has a positive impact on individual learning behaviors, academic outcomes and knowledge (DuFour & Marzano, 2016). Prior research has revealed that collaborative learning improves student achievements in their courses through formative assessment and permits students to personalize their learning experiences (Adedokun, Parker, Henke & Burgess, 2017). Including collaborative learning as an EI in this program was beneficial for the participants and demonstrated that the program was successful in increasing engagement for the participants.

‘Quality interactions’ was the second EI employed by the program, and the intent was to motivate students and encourage them to persevere towards the individual goals that they identified at the beginning of the semester during their application process. NSSE (2019) explained that quality interactions are important because college environments characterized by positive interpersonal relations promote student learning and success. Students who enjoy supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff are better able to find assistance when needed and learn from and with those around them (NSSE, 2019). This program was successful in creating quality interactions between staff and students and also successful in creating quality interactions between peers. Some students were discouraged by the lack of commitment from their groupmates and this played a role in the depth of relationships that were created. Participants shared that these interactions helped them to feel comfortable at the recreation center, motivated them, and helped them to push towards the goals they set for themselves.

The third EI that was considered during the development of this program was creating a supportive environment. Venugopal-Wairagade (2016) found that a supportive environment is one of the key factors that contribute to an effective learning process. Supportive environments contribute to success through involvement, specifically cognitive, social, and physical means (NSSE, 2019). This EI summarizes students' perceptions of how much an institution emphasizes services and activities that support their learning and development. Staff relationships play a major role in student engagement and through this, students become more involved and foster relationships of their own (Larmer & Ingamells, 2010). Venugopal-Wairagade (2016) suggested that in order to create an effective learning environment, university staff and faculty members

should aim to build a supportive learning environment for students to acquire and create knowledge through instructional, peer, and institutional support. Venugopal-Wairagade (2016) also found that along with support from the student's family and society, the support given by peers, instructors, and the institution are of paramount significance in improving student engagement. The Freshman Fit staff took initiative to create a supportive environment which encouraged learning and engagement with students in order to create a sense of belonging for the students which increases the feeling of community.

Sense of Belonging

Participants noted that this program helped to create a sense of belonging and that belonging was an important part of their experience. Belonging was considered in this research project because belonging has been closely associated with engagement and can be fostered by a range of academic and extracurricular programs (Nasuja & Jones, 2016). Belonging is conceptualized as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged, and feeling that they are an important part of the university (Thomas, 2012). It is important to note this in order to identify the importance of including it in the development of the program and future programming. Freshman Fit participants were given an opportunity to connect with other freshman students and participation allowed for some immediate structure to their weekly routine as they started their college career. Having group members and personal trainers to motivate them and to connect with helped them to feel that they belonged at the university. Similarly, these interactions helped to increase sense of belonging because they felt that someone was invested in their wellbeing and genuinely cared. The small group opportunities helped participants to feel

included while pushing them to work towards their goals and never feel judged. These findings correlate with previous research. Henchy (2011) states that the social benefits of student participation in campus recreation activities included improvement of self-confidence, integration of different cultures, decreases student isolation, sense of belonging to the university, and trust in peers. Freshman Fit participants shared, through conversation and questionnaires, that they gained confidence, felt part of a community, did not feel alone, and had a sense of belonging in relation to the university. Participants shared that when they became more comfortable in the recreation center through social experience they gained confidence to talk to more people outside of the recreation center. Being able to function outside of the Freshman Fit group is important for continued achievement of their goals. This confidence to be able to carry out these learned skills on one's own also allows for students to make connections outside of their group and interact with professionals besides their personal trainer. Participants were able to interact with students who had different characteristics than their own through these connections allowing them to have diverse interactions, which is an important component of engagement. Previous research identifies that recreation participation has a direct relationship with developing a sense of community and belonging and plays an important role in friendship, socialization and physical activity (Hall, 2004; Henchy, 2011). The responses gathered by the Freshman Fit participants align with this finding. Since sense of belonging plays an important role in engagement it is encouraging for programmers that these freshmen recognized a connection between their participation and feeling that they belong on campus.

Social Theory of Learning & Communities of Practice

Wegner's social theory of learning and the accompanying communities of practice (CoP) concept play an important role in increasing engagement and creating a sense of belonging. Wegner's (2009) social theory of learning is a multi-dimensional way of looking at learning in which learning occurs through active participation in activities with people, construction of identities within these communities and meaning-making processes (Bandura, 1977; Masika & Jones, 2015). This theory and CoP were considered in the development of the Freshman Fit program. These perspectives were considered because a campus recreation program designed around these frameworks will contribute to participants' development and education. These perspectives were also considered because STL and CoP emphasize the importance of creating community and identity formation as a function of participation (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). According to the CoP perspective, learning has to be placed in the context of lived experience and participation in the social world. CoP can arise in a variety of ways and occur when people engage in a common activity and learn together through this process (Herne, Adams, Atkinson, Dash & Jessell, 2013).

Within the concept of CoP there are four interconnected learning components: community, practice, meaning and identity within the social setting. Responses from the participants indicate that some of these interconnected learning components are present with this program, but not all. According to the CoP theory, learning involves active participation in activities with people and practices in social communities, construction of identities within the communities, and an individual's meaning making of the activities completed. Learning is not just an accumulation of new knowledge and skills, it is also a

process of becoming. Although this program had many of the components of STL & CoP, this program did not create context for a community to endure. There were not enough frequent interactions where social connections could deepen and identity creation within these communities could take place.

Although not fully present, it is helpful to examine the parts of the program that may be indicative of this theory and an applicable theoretical framework. One way that these theories are represented is that learning is taking place together in a lived experience through participation in the small group fitness and nutrition programming. Tinto (2003) noted that students learn better together and form self-supporting groups when they are a part of a community. This program promoted community through small groups, communication practices, and encouragement. The participants generated knowledge through interactions, information exchange, and advice from one another and their personal trainer. Students are engaging in a common activity (physical activity) and learning about nutrition and fitness together which creates community during their programming. Collaborative learning, collaborating with peers in solving problems or mastering material, plays a role in in these theories as this perspective occurs when people engage in a common activity and learn together through this process. Participants were able to learn new skills and gain knowledge related to nutrition and fitness that they are able to take with them as they progress out of the freshman Fit program. Participants learned these skills through collaborating with peers and active participation. Participants shared that being part of these communities allowed them to focus on their health, learn new habits, and do things they never thought that they would do. Several participants shared that being part of Freshman Fit gave them confidence, new friends, and made

them feel not alone throughout the process. Students also identified that when asked about their college year that they would mention Freshman Fit because it was one of the first programs that they truly got involved with on campus.

Given that CoP ultimately proved not to be a good theoretical tool for this study, it is helpful to identify an alternative theory that would be helpful for making sense of participants' experiences. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), also known as Social Learning Theory (SLT), has been used to predict physical activity in undergraduate students (Sriramatr, Silalertdetkul, Wachirathanin, 2016). Albert Bandura's SCT, a theory of human agency, suggests that new patterns of behavior are acquired through direct experience and observation of others (1971). With this theory, learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context, meaning both internal and external processes are deserving of analysis. SCT emphasizes that cognitive processes precede and regulate behavior, meaning that individuals are capable of behavior change through self-regulation, anticipation of expected outcomes, and analysis during reflection (Bandura, 1986; Farren, Zhang, Martin, Thomas, 2017). In addition to cognitive factors, two other domains exist. These factors have influence over each other, which Bandura refers to as reciprocal determinism.

The first domain, personal cognitive factors, includes self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and outcome expectations is an important one to Bandura's work. Although these factors were not intentionally included in the Freshman Fit program, nor focused on during this research, these indirect findings are noteworthy of reference. Self-efficacy is the belief in oneself and ability to succeed and it plays a major role in how a person approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. Self-efficacy effects learning processes by

influencing cognitive, emotional, motivational and decisional processes. Bandura stated that self-efficacy can be built by mastery experience, social modeling, social persuasion, and states of physiology (Bandura, 1977). Personal cognitive factors (self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and outcome expectations) were included. Although present, these cognitive factors did not shape data collection of this project and these were incidental findings that are not supported by direct research methods. Participants reported increased confidence in their own ability to participate in a community and an increase in their confidence in order to be physically active. Participants also reported an increased confidence in group participation and the ability to support their groupmates. Participants shared their expectations (personal goals) of the program during the initial application process. While end of the program assessments were collected by the personal trainers, it was not collected as part of the data collection process of this study. While quantitative data was not collected, the qualitative data does note that participants felt that the program allowed them to reach their goals of making campus recreation participation part of their routine. These incidental findings about cognitive factors warrant more research in the future.

The second domain, which is where this theoretical framework is most applicable to the Freshman Fit program, is socioenvironmental. Socioenvironmental factors include observational learning, social support, and barriers and opportunities. Observational learning took place through group work and personal trainer mentorship. Freshman Fit created opportunities and removed behavior barriers by providing social support through small group programming, learning windows and schedule structure. One of the most influential environmental factors among college students is their social support network

(Wallace, Buckworth, Kirby, & Sherman, 2000). The results of this study also support this finding. Freshman Fit participants noted that social support (*being included, being involved and having interactions*) were most important in their success of the program, increasing a sense of belonging and encouraging engagement. In addition to these benefits, social support is commonly thought of as an influencer to self-efficacy, which represents Bandura's idea of reciprocal determinism, and should be considered further in order to increase these benefits. This research suggests that health professionals on a college campus could create an opportunity for all incoming students that could be used to match students based on participants' ability and interests. This strategy allows the students to witness modeling and establish a relative social support system. Reciprocal determinism is also prevalent when looking at how behavior is influenced by both encouraging and discouraging social factors.

The third domain, behavioral factors, include behavioral capacity, intentions, and reinforcement or punishment. This was also prevalent during the Freshman Fit program as many participants noted changes in their fitness, nutrition, and social behaviors. Bandura suggests that individuals are both products and producers of their environment (Bandura, 1989). In terms of behavioral capacity, Freshman Fit participation allowed for an increase in knowledge through personal trainer instruction, weekly emails, and nutrition mentorship. Modeling took place through direct experience and observation of others during small group programming. Students became more engaged due to participation in these activities through social support: *being included, being involved and having interactions*. Student intentions were altered by their participation in Freshman Fit by increasing their interest in getting involved with other programming and increasing

their willingness to participate in teamwork activities. Lastly, participation in this program offered social rewards for participants by allowing for friendships to form and for mentorship opportunities to arise.

Freshman Fit allowed an opportunity for these domains to have influence on another for the benefit of the participants during the fall 2018 Freshman Fit program. In summary, SCT denotes that new behaviors are not learned through direct exposure, but rather, they are learned indirectly through experience and observation. Self-efficacy is a key factor in this theoretical framework and should be explored intentionally in future research. Socioenvironmental and behavioral factors influenced one another during this program and were prevalent throughout this research. Social support was identified as the most influencing factor to the Freshman Fit participants in relation to their success within the program. These components play an important role in creating a sense of belonging and engaging students in the university culture and learning.

Additional Findings

Through conversation with students some unexpected, yet important, data were collected. Students were given the opportunity to give any additional feedback about the program or their experience. Several students shared that because of the program they gained confidence, fell in love with working out, and felt ready to work out on their own outside of a group atmosphere. It was also noted that Freshman Fit contributed to growth for first-year students. This program had a direct influence on the participants and shaped their habits, experiences, and personal growth journey. A program that has residual outcomes, like the ones mentioned by participants, is one that should be considered by programmers when focusing on engagement.

During the focus groups students were asked how they defined success as a college student. These responses are important because to truly understand if this program was successful in increasing engagement it is also important to look at how participants defined success as a college student, as engagement plays a role in success. Participants defined being successful multiple ways and are represented through several themes: good grades, achieving personal goals, dealing with the emotional strains of college, balance, enjoying the process, personal growth and social connections. Another qualitative study that looked at how students defined academic success noted importance of grades and value of learning and hard work (Dumke, Tyndall, Naff, Crowder, & Cauley, 2018). The embodied and emotional nature of success, using terms such as ‘happiness,’ ‘enjoyment’ and ‘growth’ is an area that has been also found in other research (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). One area that the participants did not share that was found in previous research was that success was often regarded as an ability to simply keep going despite obstacles or barriers to participation (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Through examining previous research and this study it is noteworthy that success is a very individualized term based on one’s own perceptions and background.

In summary, students need to feel encouraged, a sense of belonging, accepted, valued, included, and these needs can be met through social participation (Masika & Jones, 2016). Sense of belonging and engagement are derived from the meaning making process of college students and these ideas are more prevalent when opportunities for active learning, social interaction, shared experiences, positive feedback and reflection are present. Freshman Fit gave opportunities for students to learn together and interact

with their freshman peers. Creating a safe place where students can interact and learn is valuable to student experience. The Freshman Fit program was successful in introducing freshman students to the recreation center, teaching them the basics of fitness and nutrition, and increasing student engagement and sense of belonging. Social opportunities played an important role in these successes.

In terms of participants meaning making of engagement, this study was successful in getting a general understanding of how students define the term and the role engagement plays in their experience. Through analysis this study revealed that students make sense of the term engagement through three themes: *being included, being involved, and having quality interactions*. While there are other components to the true definition of engagement, participants' understanding of the term focused on the social aspects of the definition, meaning this is what was most relevant to them. Participants shared that these social connections shaped their Freshman Fit experience. Students felt that these connections allowed them to develop relationships, be more comfortable, and learn new skills. These social connections also played a role in creating a sense of belonging for the participants. Participants appreciated that this program created a sense of belonging as they transitioned into their college career.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was successful in determining how freshman participants make meaning of the term engagement and how the Freshman Fit program aided in creating a sense of belonging at the university. Although this program evaluation was successful and provided quality data that can be useful to student affairs professionals, there are several areas of the research design that could use some improvement. Throughout this research project there were opportunities where new questions arose and new research interests came about.

Implications and Recommendations

When looking at the results of the present study, many repeating themes are found compared with literature and previous studies. Similarly, to this study, other researchers found that students relationships, faculty interactions and environment are all important to student experience. Although this may seem redundant, this is an important function of social science. The findings of this study corroborates with past findings which indicate that they should be considered when developing programs for students in order to create the best experience possible for participants.

While results of this study may be similar to others, the program being study was unique. This program was successful in supporting student engagement and creating a sense of belonging for freshman participants. This program is the only of its kind in the middle Tennessee area and provides a great opportunity for universities to meet the needs of incoming freshman. By capturing these students and investing in their wellbeing university staff is able to make a genuine connection to these students which will increase engagement and help to develop a sense of belonging. This type of program, one that

focuses on physical, social, and environmental needs, should be implemented at universities across the country.

For traditional students, creating a positive first year experience is important for retention rates as the first year of college is a transition period for students. Personal and social challenges arise during the first year as many students are away from home for the first time. These challenges include, but are not limited to, a newly found independence, living with roommates, daily living activities, homesickness, self-efficacy, and identity development (Everett, 2017). The primary focus of first year seminars or programs should include methods that engage student in the learning process and address their academic, personal, and social needs. Strong social networks, such as the ones Freshman Fit promoted, can contribute to a first-year students' academic performance as friendships help students quickly settle down and make progress with their studies (Katanis, 2000). Programming focused around creating good habits and social support systems allow for students to gain confidence that will give them confidence to continue their higher education journey. This type of programming needs to give students tools that will set them up for success outside of the given program. These first-year programs should promote environments that encourage identity development and self-efficacy. Programs must be developed in order to focus on identity development and to the ways in which students perceive their roles, abilities and contributions outside of college (Day et al., 2004). This can be done by providing an atmosphere where students feel comfortable providing feedback, asking questions, and making decisions. These environments should support the idea of community and relationship building. University administrators should examine their first-year programming and look to see if these programs include components that lead to student success.

For general first year programming, program administrators need to be sure that they are conducting program assessments in addition to including program components that promote engagement and sense of belonging. Assessment is a powerful tool that assists in building a more efficient and effective program (Astin, 1996). Assessment can directly enhance the educational mission by strengthening the learning/teaching process and indirectly by informing programmers about the most efficient and insufficient program components. When a strong assessment protocol is in place and programmers take the time to conduct these assessments that serves the institution, administrators will respect the program and understand its purpose. When institutions better understand programs' limitations, strengths, and potential, the program is likely to be much more successful in fulfilling the mission set forth by the programmers. By becoming more aware of what the impact programs have on the student body, the more successful institutions will be in fulfilling their educational potential (Astin, 1996). In order to fulfill this potential a have a successful program evaluation, some adjustments should be made to this program evaluation design.

As a result of this project, I believe that first year programs should focus on creating social support systems, which ought to include both students and staff. These programs need to create a safe environment where relationships can form. These relationships not only benefit the student through increasing engagement and sense of belonging, but aid in the mission of the university by increasing retention. Socioenvironmental factors ought to be included in the development and implementation of first year programing. This suggestion is based off of students' definition of engagement, which has been shown to be a factor in success and retention. Students defined engagement as *being included, being involved, and having interactions*, and can

be summarized as social connections. In addition to providing an opportunity for social connections to take place, first year programming should provide students with a general understanding about the subject at hand. For example, when looking at the Freshman Fit program, participants learned about a wide variety of physical activity exercises and applicable nutrition knowledge. Similarly, first year programming should focus on modeling opportunities to give students the opportunity to be directly exposed and experience the task at hand so that learning can take place. Giving students an opportunity to learn within a controlled environment will give them confidence to continue their learning in other aspects of their college career. This study revealed that social connections and direct exposure through experience are beneficial to first year students.

Although this study focused on traditional first year students, first year students are not the only students who will benefit from programs focused around social connections and experience. Co-curricular design of programs would allow for more students to be reached and for more benefits all around. Co-curricular programs facilitated through student affairs allows for enriched learning to take place that corresponds with the academic mission. Programs on campus should align their programs to match what students are learning in the classroom. Program administrators should focus on creating programs that give students tools that will lead them to be successful academically. Programs that focus on building social connections will give students opportunities to become comfortable with teamwork activities, learn to interact with others in a productive manner, and apply what is learned in a practical way. Additionally, programs should have a curriculum in place that is evidence based in relation from their programs research field. Creating a program based on best practices will create a

meaningful experience for the student and increase learning opportunities. Faculty and staff need to work together across campus in order to create comprehensive co-curricular programs that will benefit the student emotionally, physically, and academically. When these programs include what is most important to the students, are research based, and address multiple areas of individual needs, the participants will be successful in their academic journey.

Improvement of Research Design

This program was intended to give students the tools they need to be successful in their health journey at college while increasing engagement and sense of belonging. However, it was limited to a very specific group of students. Students self-selected into this program, which indicates that they already had an interest in health and fitness, meaning that with this general interest, participants are more likely to be engaged in the program compared to students who do not have this embedded interest. Results of this study would vary if different groups of students who have different interests and needs would participate. One way to address this would be to partner with academics and make participation a requirement, which would get more students involved. One way that this could be done would be to create a partnership with the freshman university courses and make participation in the program a percentage of their course grade. It would be necessary in the recruitment of these students to mold the program to their specific needs, interests, and view of success. By doing this, students will become more engaged as the program will be more individualized to their particular interests and needs. For example, for a student whose hobby includes playing video games it would be beneficial to include exergaming, a term used for video games that are also a form of exercise, as part of the program. Students should be given the opportunity to make meaningful decisions around

their participation to increase engagement. These types of opportunities should be considered in future research designs.

Participants were asked to share their goals with their personal trainers at the beginning of the semester. As part of this study, there was no follow up as to whether students reached the goals that they set for themselves and this information would be beneficial. Having this information would have been valuable in providing important information regarding success on their health journey during the program. One thing to note is that only two participants' end of the semester assessments were shared, as not all personal trainers completed the end of the semester assessments due to lack of interest and forgetfulness. Some personal trainers omitted these from their final group sessions leading to a different experience for some participants in regard to having some quantitative assessments for themselves. Students who did not do the end of the semester assessments, or if the personal trainer did not go over their assessments with them, are missing an important part of the feedback loop. This effects intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Not having these results also limits transference as there is no "now what?" discussion. These results are also important in relation to the research itself as having these results would allow the researcher to see if having physical results matters to a student's sense of belonging and level of engagement. In addition to not looking specifically at goal attainment, the fitness assessments, which were carefully created in the development of this program, were not considered when conducting the research aspect. Having these outcomes would be beneficial to providing more thorough feedback for a complete outcome based program evaluation.

Another consideration for the research design would be to ask students halfway through the program to see what they would like more or less of in terms of content,

which would be a formative program evaluation. Giving students an opportunity to be involved with the program design helps to build self-efficacy, which is an important component of CoP and helps to make sure students are getting everything they want out of their participation in the program. Identity formation could be promoted through deeper relationship opportunities such as meeting more than once a week and having opportunities outside of group. A student who has formed their identity around campus recreation will value campus recreation activities and will be intrinsically motivated to continue their participation. Other ideas for opportunities to strengthen relationships and identities include a group 5k, non-fitness based group socialization, such as trivia, cookouts, and movie nights, and cooking cart demonstrations. CoP is still an evolving concept and gives potential for shedding light on how individuals learn within these communities. Programs should continue to focus on optimizing specific characteristics of the concept, such as support, social connections, sharing knowledge, and building a sense of belonging within the groups.

Improvement to the research design overall would provide different outcomes for both the research and the program. With this project, resources played a factor in the quality of data collection. With more resources there would be more consistency in who was collecting the data, how the program was carried out, and the likelihood of more participants. In a perfect situation, with unlimited time and money, the researcher would hire a research assistant to help with data collection and a full-time personal trainer to work with all Freshman Fit groups. By hiring a research assistant, there would be consistency in when the questionnaires were handed out so that administration would align with the research timeline. The research assistant would also be available to help keep the personal trainer on track by reminding them of the research timeline (e.g., do not

forget to carry out your end of the semester assessments). The researcher and research assistant would work together to compile and analyze the data which would increase trustworthiness. The data collection process would also benefit from having more time as the researcher could conduct all of the focus groups, which would lead to consistency in how questions are asked and where conversation is guided base on participants' conversation. Having one personal trainer for all the groups would ensure that the program agenda is being carried out appropriately and all participants are getting the same experience. Ensuring that students are having the same experience will lead to better quality data. Having more money for this research project would allow for more participants to be recruited through incentives. It would also be beneficial to use extra resources to expand this project to multiple universities, which would provide more data. Another big change in the research design would allow the researcher to immerse themselves in the program and to add an ethnographic aspect to this study. Attending sessions would give the researcher an opportunity to see social connections from a new viewpoint and allow for behaviors and emotions to be explored directly. Quality of conversations with the participants would also benefit from this type of modification which would lead to better quality data. Lastly, it would be interesting to make this study a longitudinal study. By making this a longitudinal study the researcher could look at retention and graduation rates, GPA, and health and social behaviors through the participants' college career. This longitudinal study should have a control group of non-participating students for comparison purposes.

Implications for Practice

In order to promote student success in the program, the theory of communities of practice (CoP) was considered in the development of this program. One key to CoP

theory is that members of the community can demonstrate their learning and competency through extended interaction with one another and thereby construct an identity. In order to make this happen in the Freshman Fit program, participants must be provided an opportunity where they can meet more in order to deepen social connections and demonstrate their new skills. Adding in mid and end of the semester evaluations allows students to reflect on their experience and what they have learned while giving them an opportunity to give feedback about their participation in the program. However, students were not directly given an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned during group sessions. Giving participants an opportunity to lead group sessions would be a way that they could demonstrate their learned skill and aid in identity formation. This would be beneficial to include in future semesters. A way that this could be done is to allow participants to have an opportunity during group to lead their groupmates through a short workout.

One idea that is already being considered on this campus and others is having a residence hall devoted to a campus recreation theme. At this campus specifically, “Raider Rec Village” is a living learning community housed within one of the residence halls. This living learning community is a great example of how co-curricular relationships can work together to benefit the student population. It is open to incoming freshmen who are interested in all of the opportunities that Campus Recreation has to offer. When students choose to live here they are given the opportunity to participate in select events, such as Raider Rec Village exclusive outdoor recreation trips. This type of opportunity provides an environment where identity formation can take place due to the increased social experiences and participation opportunities. It would be beneficial to modify this study and to look at the students who choose to reside in these residence halls and how their

experience effects identity formation, their engagement levels and sense of belonging at the university.

In addition to CoP being an area of interest for application, the findings around student success should be considered. Student success is defined by many ways, but the emic definition is extremely important in contributing to student experience as the students will respond based on their internal drive. This study revealed that freshman students define success through several themes: good grades, achieving personal goals, dealing with the emotional strains of college, balance, enjoying the process, personal growth and social connections. When these themes are thoroughly considered the needs of the students can be met and engagement will increase. When students feel that they are being successful in their academic endeavors they are more likely to continue their education. Meaning making of success will vary depending on the group of students and their individual interests and needs. In order to understand students' needs, students need to be included in decision making processes. Keeping these emic definitions in mind, campus recreation programmers need to stop having a one size fits all approach and accommodate the specific needs of the participants.

Lastly, during focus group conversations many participants were discouraged by the lack of effort and retention of some of their group members. This also resulted in smaller focus groups in some instances. It may be beneficial, for both the students and the researcher, to have slightly larger small groups (more than 3-4 participants) so that participants have more students to connect with and the percentage of students still participating at the end of the semester may be higher. Several students shared during conversation that they would like to meet with their groups and personal trainer more

than once a week. This could be beneficial for learning and mastering of material. Although it is not probable that each group would be able to meet more than once, it would be a good idea to offer weekly drop in sessions for Freshman Fit participants and the personal trainers could rotate who runs these sessions. The focus of these sessions could be to have the students demonstrate the skills they learned in group that week or the previous week. Participants were encouraged to interact with one another outside of group in order to have accountability when applying their new knowledge and support. Conversations with student revealed that many students did not carry these relationships outside of the groups. It would be beneficial to the promotion of collaborative learning to give students an opportunity to work through the material during group sessions in a way that they need to work together to solve a problem or teach one another what they learned. Having a second opportunity during the week would also be beneficial for increasing social interactions between participants. These small changes in both the research design and in the structure of the program itself would be beneficial.

Future Considerations

This study opens the door for future research related to freshman programming, campus recreation programming, and student affairs. As explored earlier, Wenger's social theory of learning helps to explain the importance of student engagement and why it is relevant to the concern of student retention and is framed by communities of practice. Community consists of learning as belonging, practice is learning by doing, meaning is learning by experiencing and identity is described as learning by making meaning of the learning process. These components play an important role in creating a sense of belonging and engaging students in the university culture and learning. My future research will look at how higher education administrators can create a place for true

community of practice experiences to take place and how student peer relationships affect their success. Research questions that will be used to guide this study will be “how are relationships influenced by a communities of practice setting?” and “how does ‘learning together’ promote mastering of material?” and “does participation in this program effect identity formation of the participants?”

Another future study should utilize Bandura’s SLT and look at how increasing self-efficacy in freshman students promotes retention and graduation. Questions surrounding self-efficacy should be asked in relation to the participants experience with the program and how it affects their college career overall. More specifically, the research will look at “what role does campus recreation play in increasing self-efficacy?” and “how do participants make meaning of confidence in relation to program success?” These would both be qualitative in nature and use focus groups as a main method of data collection. It would be beneficial for the researcher to have an understanding of learning theories and be up to date on evidence-based practice suggestions. The researcher needs to have the time and resources to connect with the participants and be involved with both the planning and implementation of the program.

More research needs to be conducted with improved tools and improved structure to the program being evaluated. This type of research provides information that can be used as an opportunity to encourage students to play an active role in their health. Future research will explore how student peer relationships might impact their success and how universities can create more cohesion between students. More specifically, a focus on how the freshman curriculum can be expanded to other departments in order to better address the health and retention barriers. Future research would include asking “What barriers do freshman participants feel are keeping them from their health goals?” and

would also look at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in regards to engagement. This could be done by using the Cognitive Evaluation Theory, a subcategory of Self Determination Theory, which is an approach to human motivation and personality (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can be examined by looking at what activities are altering feelings, behaviors, and creating autonomy.

Another area of future research should look at how departments across campus can collaborate to increase student engagement while keeping health at the center of the program plan. Student health plays an important role in student success and should be a priority of all departments. When different departments work together with student success in mind it creates a comprehensive approach which will create comprehensive working relationships and strengthen the programs while opening up more opportunities for learning to take place across campus. Long term, an action research approach to expand programs like Freshman Fit to multiple universities would be beneficial.

Participatory action research (PAR), just like many other qualitative methodologies, is based on the perspective that knowledge generation is a collaborative process. When using a PAR approach each participant's experiences and ideas are a critical part to the outcome of the study. PAR allows for a critical issue to be examined through a partnership of the researcher and participants. This is a methodology that allows the researcher and participants to create partnerships and collaborate while having a distinct action oriented goal. The researcher works to develop questions that will focus on creating dialogue and generation of knowledge through collaborative engagement. The action element is a process that allows for engaging, exercising and practicing ideas to change the conditions or problems one faces. In addition to having an action component, the research agenda also must have a strong reflection component that allows

both the researcher and participant to reflect on the process and the data gathered.

Through PAR participants are able to share their realities, challenges and understanding of the experiences which allows for the researcher to gain an emic perspective and a more in depth understanding of the participants beliefs and their emotions tied to the subject.

The overall goal of this type of work is to give the participants a voice and make them part of the research project versus being a subject of the project and to create a continual process of action and reflection. This type of research allows for self-reflection that can lead to greater self-awareness that then may be carried into other aspects of the participants' (and researcher's) life.

When looking at developing a program, such as a Freshman Fit program to help college students make strides in their health, it is important to consider the best plan of action so that outcomes are reasonable and meaningful to not only administrators, but most importantly to the participants involved. PAR is a tool that is used to generate knowledge and create change while providing a method of exposure, instruction and improvements, and facilitates learning. Participants will have the opportunity to collaborate with professionals to define learning objectives, construct research questions, pool knowledge, conduct research, interpret the results and apply the information discovered to make adjustments to the program in the future. In this type of project, the researcher will work with program administrators to develop learning outcomes and a schedule for the program based off of feedback from previous semesters. These outcomes will be given to the participants at the beginning of the program and their feedback will be requested. Bi-weekly focus groups will give opportunities for the participants to give their feedback to both the researcher and program administrator so that changes based on participants' needs can be made throughout the program. At the end of the program,

participants will be given an opportunity to reflect on their experience and provide feedback to make adjustments for the future programs. This reflection will influence learning outcomes and procedures of the program so that freshman students' needs are being met through the program itself. PAR will blur the line between research and practice, which makes it a cohesive approach when working with campus recreation programmers. Campus recreation, a subcategory of student affairs, works to provide services to students to improve their health and increase engagement. Programs within campus recreation should be action focused and not solely based on previous research, but on what the participant's need from the programming. This two-way approach, or collaboration, can reduce alienation of the participants and help to encourage deeper understanding and learning throughout the program. PAR is an acceptable approach to creating this type of program, as successful social and educational programs adapt their interventions to the needs and the circumstances of the participants. This current research project will be a good basis for these suggested studies.

The results of this research show the importance of social connections to freshman students. Freshman are a at risk population and there needs to be programming in place that gives them the tools that they need to be successful as a student. Social connections allow students to interact with one another and faculty/staff within the program but also outside of the program. Social connections are an important part of engagement for students. By increasing engagement and creating an opportunity for sense of belonging to occur, universities are setting their students up for success. Giving students these tools not only set them up for success for their academic career but also for when they enter the real world. In order to create an environment where student success

can occur, programs need to be developed through the use of evidence based research and best practices need to be implemented. These programs should be co-curricular, meaning that they align with the academic mission. Co-curricular programs can be strengthened through a comprehensive approach where members across campus are involved in the development of the program. This will lead to a strong, well rounded program that will benefit students and the mission of the university. Evidence based, co-curricular programs that focus on creating opportunities for social connections to take place will be beneficial for students and aid to the mission of the university.

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APPENDIX A



Eat Right

Food, Nutrition and Health Tips from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Eating Right for a Healthy Weight

Reaching and maintaining a healthier weight contributes to your overall health and well being. Losing even a few pounds or preventing further weight gain has health benefits.

Are you ready to make changes in your lifestyle and move toward a healthier weight? Here are some tips to get you started.

Start with a plan for lifelong health. Focus on the big picture—achieving overall good health—not just short-term weight loss.

Set healthy, realistic goals. You are more likely to succeed in reaching realistic goals when you make changes step-by-step. Start with one or two specific, small changes at a time. Track your progress by keeping a food and activity log.

Get a personalized eating plan. Go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov for a plan that will give you the amounts of each food group you need daily. If you have special dietary needs, consult a registered dietitian for a customized plan.

Eat at least three meals a day and plan your meals ahead of time. Whether you're eating at home, packing a lunch or eating out, an overall eating plan for the day will help keep you on track.

Balance your plate with a variety of foods. Half your plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables, about one fourth with lean meat, poultry or fish, and one fourth with grains. To round out your meal, add fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt or cheese.

Start your meal with low calorie foods like fruits, vegetables and salads. These foods are packed with nutrients your body needs.

Focus on your food. Pick one place to sit down and eat at home. Eating while doing other things may lead to eating more than you think. Also, switching from a large plate to a smaller one may help you feel satisfied with reduced portions.



Know when you've had enough to eat. Quit before you feel full or stuffed. It takes about 20 minutes for your brain to get the message that your body is getting food. When your brain gets this message, you stop feeling hungry. So, fast eaters—slow down and give your brain a chance to get the word.

Get plenty of fiber from fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains. Fiber can help you feel full longer and lower your risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Watch portion sizes to manage your calorie intake. This is the key to an effective weight management plan. To make sure your portion sizes are "just right," visit the MyPlate Food Groups Food Galleries at www.choosemyplate.gov/STEPS/howmuchshouldyoueat.html for healthy eating guidelines in household measures.

Snack smart. Include snacks as part of your daily calorie allowance and limit portions to one serving. Plan for nutritious snacks to prevent between-meal hunger. Keep portable, healthy snacks in your desk, backpack or car.

Find your balance between food and physical activity. Regular physical activity is important for your overall health and fitness—plus, it helps control body weight, promotes a feeling of well-being and reduces the risk of chronic diseases.

Pick activities you like and do each for at least 10 minutes at a time. Aim for a total of 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week of moderate activity such as brisk walking. If you are currently inactive, check with your doctor concerning increased physical activity.

Is it right for you?

Make sure your weight management plan is right for you. Does it include:

- Foods from all five food groups?
- The right number of servings from each group?
- Food you will enjoy eating for the rest of your life?
- Foods you can buy at the supermarket?
- Some of your favorite foods?
- Foods that fit your budget and lifestyle?
- Regular physical activity or exercise?

If the answer is "yes" to all the questions, your weight management plan is right for you.

A registered dietitian nutritionist can develop a personalized weight management plan that meets your individual needs. For names of registered dietitian nutritionists in your area, visit www.eatright.org.

For more information about healthy eating, visit www.eatright.org and www.ChooseMyPlate.gov.

For a referral to a registered dietitian nutritionist and for additional food and nutrition information visit www.eatright.org.



The **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics** is the largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. The Academy is committed to improving the public's health and advancing the profession of dietetics through research, education and advocacy.

This tip sheet is provided by:

Authored by Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics staff registered dietitian nutritionists.
Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ADA Complete Food & Nutrition Guide.

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Eat Right

Food, Nutrition and Health Tips from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Eat Right with MyPlate

Find your healthy eating style using these recommendations from the *2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines*.

Simply start with small changes to make healthier choices you can enjoy.



Make half your plate fruits and vegetables: Focus on whole fruits.

- Choose whole fruits –fresh, frozen, dried or canned in 100% juice.
- Enjoy fruit with meals, as snacks or as a dessert



Make half your plate fruits and vegetables: Vary your veggies.

- Try adding fresh, frozen or canned vegetables to salads, sides and main dishes.



Make half your grains whole grains.

- Look for whole grains listed first or second on the ingredients list - try oatmeal, popcorn, whole-grain bread and brown rice.
- Limit grain desserts and snacks such as cakes, cookies and pastries.



Vary your protein routine.

- Mix up your protein foods to include seafood, beans and peas, unsalted nuts and seeds, soy products, eggs, and lean meats and poultry.
- Try main dishes made with beans and seafood, like tuna salad or bean chili.



Drink and eat less sodium, saturated fat and added sugars.

- Use the Nutrition Facts label and ingredients list to limit items high in sodium, saturated fat and added sugars.
- Choose vegetable oils instead of butter and oil-based sauces and dips instead of ones with butter, cream or cheese.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks.



Move to low-fat or fat-free milk or yogurt.

- Choose fat-free milk, yogurt and fortified soy beverages (soy milk) to cut back on saturated fat.
- Replace sour cream, cream and regular cheese with low-fat yogurt, milk and cheese.

Find more healthy eating tips at:

- www.eatright.org
- www.kidseatright.org
- www.ChooseMyPlate.gov

For a referral to a registered dietitian nutritionist and for additional food and nutrition information visit www.eatright.org.



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Eat Right

Food, Nutrition and Health Tips from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Smart Snacking for Adults and Teens

Snacks can fit into a healthy eating plan and provide an energy boost between meals, if they're planned right. Choosing nutritious foods from the MyPlate food groups can help increase variety and reduce sources of empty calories and added sugar.

Snacks for people who are less active should be 200 calories or less. To fuel more active teens and adults, snacks can contain 200 to 300 calories per serving.

Make snacking a smart habit by:

- **Snacking only when you're hungry.** Eating out of boredom or for emotional reasons can lead to weight gain. Rate your hunger before reaching for a snack and avoid mindless eating.
- **Having snacks planned and portioned out ahead of time.** Fixing snacks in advance, like washed and cut-up fruits and vegetables, air-popped popcorn, and low-fat cheese, can save time later on.
- **Practicing food safety.** Keep perishable foods refrigerated or in a cooler bag with ice packs to help reduce the risk of food poisoning.

Make snacking simple by substituting different fruits and vegetables, depending on what is in season or on sale. Fresh, frozen, canned (in 100% juice), or dried varieties are all good options.



Keep your snacking lively by including snacks that contain grains, especially whole grains, lean protein and healthy fats. Some examples include fat-free yogurt with fruit, whole-grain crackers with low-fat cheese, or raw veggies with hummus.

Eating different combinations of foods can be very satisfying and help to curb hunger. Snacks that include fruit can also satisfy a craving for something sweet.

Ways to make your own convenient and ready-to-eat snacks at home:

- Make your own trail mix by combining whole grain cereals, nuts or seeds and dried fruit. (Hint: portion into ¼ cup servings)
- Blend your own smoothie by adding 1 cup fat-free milk and frozen fruit to a blender.
- Mix 3 cups air-popped popcorn with grated cheese or dried spices.
- Bake vegetable chips, like kale or beets.
- Roast chickpeas (or garbanzo beans) and season with spices.
- Make a dip using low-fat cottage cheese or Greek yogurt for raw vegetables.
- Mash an avocado with salsa and eat with low-fat baked tortilla chips or spread on a whole wheat tortilla, sprinkle with low-fat cheese, then roll it up and enjoy.
- Cut up fruit to make kebobs and serve with low-fat yogurt dip.
- Slice a medium apple and eat with 1 tablespoon of peanut, almond, or sunflower seed butter.
- Mix equal amounts of fat-free plain or flavored yogurt with 100% fruit juice, then pour into paper cups and freeze for a tasty treat.
- Top graham crackers with nut or seed butter or dunk them in low-fat vanilla yogurt.
- Cut a whole wheat pita into wedges and serve with 2 tablespoons of hummus or bean dip.
- Make a veggie pizza by topping a whole wheat English muffin or pita with 2 tablespoons tomato sauce, ½ cup diced fresh veggies, and 1 ounce low-fat mozzarella cheese.
- Create a scrumptious yogurt parfait by layering 6 ounces of fat-free yogurt with ½ cup fresh or frozen fruit, then sprinkle ¼ cup (or less) low-fat granola on top.
- Prepare instant oatmeal using fat-free milk, 1 tablespoon maple syrup, a sprinkle of cinnamon, and ¼ cup dried fruit.
- Dress up a salad with a hard cooked egg or edamame, tomato, and 2 tablespoons reduced-fat dressing.
- Whip up a quesadilla in the microwave using a whole wheat tortilla, ¼ cup black beans, 1-2 tablespoons low-fat cheese and 1 ounce of salsa.
- Build veggie skewers with cherry or grape tomatoes and cubes of low-fat cheese or cooked tortellini and lean luncheon meat.
- Make a tuna apple sandwich using a 5-6 ounce can of tuna packed in water, 1 small apple (peeled and sliced into chunks), 1 tablespoon light mayo, then spread it on 2 slices of whole wheat bread.

For a referral to a registered dietitian nutritionist and for additional food and nutrition information visit www.eatright.org.



The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is the largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. The Academy is committed to improving the health and advancing the profession of dietetics through research, education and advocacy.

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5 TRAINING PRINCIPLES

OVERLOAD

Workouts must increase in difficulty, intensity, or duration as time goes on in order to trigger adaptations to your body and muscles for improvement.

SPECIFICITY

In order to get the specific results you want you must train specifically for them. For example in order to increase strength lifting is what you should be doing rather than cardio

PERIODIZATION

In order to achieve fitness goals, you must have a long-term plan. Training can switch off from harder one week to being easier the next in order to avoid overtraining but still make progress.

RECOVERY

Exercise breaks your muscles down, so you must eat enough healthy and nutrient dense foods, hydrate well, and get enough sleep in order to build your muscles up

REVERSIBILITY

Overtime consistency with exercising helps to improve or maintain fitness. If you take a short break from exercising, such as a few days or a week your progress will not be impaired. The longer of a break you take however, your progress will start to go away and you will begin to lose what you worked for.

WHY IS EXERCISE IMPORTANT?

BENEFICIAL TO YOUR OVERALL HEALTH

IT CAN HELP PREVENT LIFESTYLE DISEASES & INCREASE LONGEVITY OF LIFE

For example it can help prevent : cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. It can also help manage some diseases such as diabetes if you have already been diagnosed. Exercising now means less medical bills later in life!

DAILY EXERCISE CREATES POSITIVE ADAPTATIONS WITHIN THE BODY

With chronic exercise there are many physiological benefits!

- resting heart rate decreases
- blood pressure decreases
- brain activity is stimulated creating better memory & thinking skills
- metabolism speeds up aka you will burn more carbs and fat on a day to day basis!

IMPROVES QUALITY OF LIFE

IT GIVES YOU ENERGY & IMPROVES YOUR MOOD

Exercise releases endorphins in the body giving you that FEEL GOOD feeling! It also increases your energy level and makes you quicker on your feet (No pun intended) with thinking & reaction time! Therefore; making exercise a part of your daily routine makes for a happier, more focused, & energized you!

IMPROVES YOUR SLEEP QUALITY

Daily exercise as a part of your routine can help you fall into a deeper sleep leaving you feeling rested and energized in the morning!

TYPES OF TRAINING & BENEFITS FOR THE BODY

CARDIOVASCULAR EXERCISE

What is it? bodyweight movements of constant motion such as running, cycling, swimming, etc.

This form of exercise keeps your heart healthy, burns calories and speeds up your metabolism!

RESISTANCE TRAINING

What is it? body movements with some sort of resistance whether it be an external load (such as barbells or dumbbells), body weight, or resistance bands.

This type of exercise increases your range of motion, burns fat, builds strength!

STRETCHING

What is it? There are different kinds! Mostly we focus on dynamic & static. Dynamic is the kind you do before exercise & static is after exercise!

This increases your flexibility, range of motion, recovery after exercise, and prevents injuries

EXERCISE SLOWS THE BODY'S AGING PROCESSES

SPEEDS UP METABOLISM & INCREASE FUNCTIONALITY

Our bodies change as we age and our metabolism will get slower, our functionality may decline, etc. BUT exercise helps to slow down those declines from happening to you!

IMPROVES RANGE OF MOTION & FLEXIBILITY

The older we get if we aren't properly exercising & stretching, we lose our range of motion and flexibility, which can cause limitations and injuries in our body overtime.

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CARDIOVASCULAR EXERCISE



DEFINITION

physical activity that raises your heart rate & increases your use of oxygen

TYPES OF CARDIO

running, cycling, walking, hiking, swimming, skiing, rowing, jump rope, HIIT (high intensity interval training), etc.

BENEFITS

- A healthy heart and lungs
- Lower risk of lifestyle diseases such as: cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, etc.
- Speeds up Metabolism & helps to burn more calories
- Increases oxygen supply
- If done chronically reduces blood pressure and resting heart rate
- Boosts your mood and your energy levels

MTSU CAMPUS RECREATION

RESISTANCE TRAINING

Definition

Body movements with an added resistance. Whether it be bodyweight or an added load.

Types of Resistance

- Bodyweight
- Resistance Bands
- Loads: barbells, dumbbells, kettlebells, etc.

Major Lifts

- Multi-joint movements
- Works multiple muscle groups at once
- Examples: squat, deadlift, bench, etc.

Assistive Lifts

- Focused on one muscle group
- More concentrated movements compared to a major lift
- Examples: bicep curls, tricep extensions, etc.

Benefits

- Increases Range of Motion
- Increases Muscle Mass
- Increases Strength
- Burns Fat
- Speeds up your Metabolism
- Decreases chances of Osteoporosis and other diseases
- Lowers Resting Blood Pressure
- Increases Functionality as you Age
- Makes Daily Living Activities Easier



APPENDIX B: FRESHMAN FIT AGENDA

Fall 2018 Freshman Fit Outline			
Week	Exercise Topic	Nutrition Topic	Challenge/Reminder
9/17 - 9/21	Meet & Greet 9/17 6pm - Meet groups, trainers, nutrition team, overview of program		
9/24 - 9/28	Assessments/Orientation/ Goal Setting	Smart Snacking Handout	Attend a class you've never tried
10/1 - 10/5	Why Exercise is Important/Benefits of Exercise	Basic Nutrition Presentation	Bring a friend who's never attended classes before
10/8 - 10/12	Exercise Safety	Healthy Eating Handout	Earn 10,000 steps 3x
10/15 - 10/19	No Sessions - Break Week		
10/22 - 10/26	Resistance Training Basics	Portion Control Handout	Visit the Rec Center 3x this week
10/29 - 11/2	Cardiovascular Training Basics	Cooking Demo/Food Safety Presentation	Use 3 new pieces of equipment this week in your workouts
11/5 - 11/9	Training Principles	Nutrition Label Handout	Create at least 3 health conscious meals in dining hall
11/12 - 11/16	Importance of Mixing Up Your Routine	Diet Fads	Set a new PR for a major lift learned
11/19-11/20	Final Assessment/Wrap Up	Maintaining Health Habits	Stick with us! Encouraging participation in future semesters

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Focus Group Interview Guide

You have been chosen to participate in a focus group for a dissertation project. The focus group will consist of a variety of questions concerning your experience in the Freshman Fit Recreation program at MTSU and your level of engagement in relation to the program. In attempt to keep your identity confidential a pseudonym will be given and I will not ask any personally identifying questions. There are minimal risks and no benefits involved with this interview process. Participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to discontinue at any time. The focus group will last between ten and fifteen minutes and will be recorded with your permission. Upon completion of the focus group I will transcribe the interview and delete the recording. The results of this study will be turned in to fulfill my dissertation requirements, but will also be used to make adjustments to the program in the future.

Do you agree to the description of this assignment and grant permission to me in order to record and transcribe this interview?

Ok- Lets go ahead and start with some questions about your experience with Freshman Fit.

As we end your journey with Freshman Fit, what was your favorite part of the program?

Would you participate in this program again?

In what ways was this program beneficial for you during your first year of college?

Do you think it would have the same effect later on in your college career?

Great- Thanks! We are going to move into some more focused questions focused around the main ideas of this study.

How would you define success as a college student?

Student Engagement and Sense of belonging are two concepts we are exploring through these questions coming up. Do you have any general thoughts about these two concepts in relation to your experience?

Student engagement is summarized as the time and energy students invest to activities and the effort put forth by the institution. Student engagement encompasses what students do that leads to success in their learning. I would like to start with a few questions focused on engagement associated with your participation in this program:

- As a participant, do you feel like you were fully invested in this program?
Why or why not?
- Do you feel like the campus recreation staff supported you as a participant?
- What specific activities or procedures helped you to learn something new?
- Were you able to apply this knowledge to your life outside of campus recreation?

Sense of belonging is defined as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by teachers and peers, and the associated idea that she or he is an important part of the campus community.

- Do you feel like this program supported the idea of sense of belonging? Why or why not?

- Can you give a specific example of how this program helped you feel part of the bigger campus?
- Did your personal trainers and/or group members make you feel more comfortable?

Additional questions as felt lead through discussion:

Collaborative Learning: Collaborative learning occurs when two or more people work together to learn something. This allows you as participants to lean on one another and learn from one another.

In what ways do you feel like this program allowed for collaborative learning?

How do you feel your weekly interactions with both group members and staff help you to reach your health goals as composed to doing it alone?

Quality of Interactions: This comes through in making sure our trainers are effective in creating strong interactions amongst the people in each group.

- Did your personal trainers/nutrition counselors communicate with you in a productive way?
- How did these interactions help to motivate you?
- Do you feel that your personal trainer provided opportunities that allowed you to work together as a community?

Supportive Environment:

- Do you feel that the campus recreation staff helped to create a supportive environment?

- In what ways do you feel the Campus Recreation staff supported your educational experience?
- Did having an immediate support system help to create a sense of belonging at MTSU? How so?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your participation in Freshman Fit?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE

*Please complete the following questions as **thoroughly** as possible in relation to your personal experience. Your responses will be used to fulfill dissertation requirements and make adjustments to future Campus Recreation programs.*

What was your favorite part of the Freshman Fit program?

Why did you find it so beneficial?

Engagement: One of the goals of campus recreation is to help you feel more engaged as a student.

1. How would you define engagement?

2. Why do you think it is an important component of your experience?

3. How did this program facilitate engagement?

Sense of Belonging:

- Underline the following concepts (all that apply) that you can relate when thinking about your experience at MTSU: *Accepted Valued Included Encouraged*
 - How does campus recreation programming help to promote these ideas?

4. Do you feel a part of the community at MTSU? How does this programming help create that feeling?

Collaborative:

- During the past week/trip how often did you work with your personal trainer?
 _____ Other group members? _____
- How did your group members/Campus Recreation staff motivate you throughout the week?

- In what ways did your experience improve through the support of your group and leaders?

Quality of Interactions/Supportive Environment:

- In what ways did working with your group motivate you to push towards your goals?

- In what ways do you feel that your personal trainer encouraged you to work together as a team?

Do you feel that these interactions helped you stay on track/enjoy your experience? How so? _____

Diversity:

- Did this program allow you to have interactions with students different than you? (Example: ethnic, religious, political differences)

- What benefits **and** drawbacks do you feel you received from these interactions?

-Benefits: _____

-Drawbacks: _____

Reflect on your responses above and experiences with this program, and please share any final thoughts. These may include, *but are not limited to*:

- Suggestions you have for the program
- Engagement practices
- Sense of belonging
- Social interactions
- Your relationship between success as a student and your experience with campus recreation.

THANK YOU for your time and responses.

I look forward to chatting with you more at the end of the semester!

Please contact me with any questions or concerns at Courtney.Pruitt@mtsu.edu

APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL PAGE

IRB**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

**IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE**

Thursday, February 08, 2018

Principal Investigator	Courtney Pruitt (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Rudy Dunlap
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	<i>courtney.pruitt@mtsu.edu; rudy.dunlap@mtsu.edu</i>
Department	Health and Human Performance
Protocol Title	<i>Freshman fit program's influence in health attitudes and beliefs</i>
Protocol ID	17-2054

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	APPROVED for one year from the date of this notification
Date of expiration	10/31/2018
Participant Size	50 (FIFTY)
Participant Pool	MTSU Freshman Fit Participants
Exceptions	NONE
Restrictions	1. Data not collected on minors <18 years old. 2. Mandatory informed consent.
Comments	APPROVAL TEMPLATED MODIFIED (02.08.2018)

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (10/31/2019) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to 10/31/2017. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

Continuing Review Schedule:

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	9/30/2017	A continuing review was conducted in compliance with the Category 8 of Expedited Review on 02.08.2018. The CR was not requested until 02.06.2018 and the protocol had lapsed between 10/31/2017 and the date of CR request. No evidence of data collection or activity was found during the lapse period. The CR also determined that the failure to request a CR was to the PI's health. The IRB herewith makes a motion to allow the PI to continue the protocol. Amdnemnts were also made as part of the CR (refer below)
Second year report	9/30/2018	NOT COMPLETED
Final report	9/30/2019	NOT COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
09.08.2017	Permitted to collect data through the proposed focus group format in addition to the previously approved one-on-one interviews.	NONE
02.08.2017	1. Data collection by focus groups using a altered informed consent has been approved (explanation on file). 2. Proposed expansion of participant sample type to include individuals who still qualify as "general adults" has been approved.	Continuing Review

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.
More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).

IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Thursday, October 25, 2018

Principal Investigator	Courtney Pruitt (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Rudy Dunlap
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	<i>courtney.pruitt@mtsu.edu; rudy.dunlap@mtsu.edu</i>
Department	Health and Human Performance
Protocol Title	<i>Freshman fit program's influence in health attitudes and beliefs</i>
Protocol ID	17-2054

Dear Investigator(s),

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IRB Action	APPROVED for one year from the date of this notification	
Date of expiration	10/31/2019	Approval Date: 10/2/2016
Participant Size	50 (FIFTY)	
Participant Pool	MTSU Freshman Fit Participants	
Exceptions	NONE	
Restrictions	1. Data not collected on minors <18 years old. 2. Mandatory informed consent.	
Comments	APPROVAL TEMPLATED MODIFIED (02.08.2018)	

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**10/31/2019**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **10/31/2019**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

Continuing Review Schedule:

IRBN001

Version 1.3

Revision Date 03.06.2016

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	9/30/2017	A continuing review was conducted in compliance with the Category 8 of Expedited Review on 02.08.2018. The CR was not requested until 02.06.2018 and the protocol had lapsed between 10/31/2017 and the date of CR request. No evidence of data collection or activity was found during the lapse period. The CR also determined that the failure to request a CR was to the PI's health. The IRB herewith makes a motion to allow the PI to continue the protocol. Amdnemnts were also made as part of the CR (refer below)
Second year report	9/30/2018	A CR request was received on 10/23/2018. The CR in compliance with category 8 was completed on 10/25/2018. The protocol has been detereminted to be in good standing and the researchers are approved to continue for an additional year.
Final report	9/30/2019	NOT COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
09.08.2017	Permitted to collect data through the proposed focus group format in addition to the previously approved one-on-one interviews.	NONE
02.08.2017	1. Data collection by focus groups using a altered informed consent has been approved (explanation on file). 2. Proposed expansion of participant sample type to include individuals who still qualify as "general adults" has been approved.	Continuing Review

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