

Making Choices: Exploring Campus Recreational and Social Opportunities

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Looking back on the college experience, some of the best memories happened naturally when participating in activities we enjoy. Although we might not realize it, these experiences help to shape who we are. Without labeling something as a recreational activity, you most likely have participated in it on almost a daily basis. Every day, amidst all the other things you observe, you may have noticed recreational activities in your community. If you haven't noticed them, that's OK because this article can help you begin to notice them. In college, the opportunities increase exponentially. So if you are starting college or even thinking about college, looking at different recreational activities can be very beneficial. Not only can these activities make you happy, but they can also introduce you to people with similar interests. This article will help guide you through different steps to finding new activities in your area. These steps start with understanding your current recreation profile, then looking at options and identifying your individual interests, and finally, assessing and ultimately taking part in new opportunities. Before beginning, let's take a closer look at what recreation actually is and why so many people find it beneficial and fun.

WHAT IS RECREATION?

There are many activities in your life that influence you and your well-being. You may not always realize how important they are to you until after the activity is long done. Recreation may be one of them. Each of us probably has a different idea of what recreation means because we are all individuals with specific needs and interests. A researcher named Moon (1994) defines leisure and recreation as “any activities or programs that people participate in for fun, relaxation, diversion or amusement.” She adds that “typical leisure activities can be categorized along several dimensions: 1) physical, cultural, or social; 2) outdoor or indoor; 3) spectator or participant; 4) formal or informal; 5) independent, cooperative, or competitive; and 6) sports, games, hobbies, or toy play.” Moon also writes that “any type of activity cannot really be classified as recreation unless the person participating is having fun, is enjoying him or herself, and includes some element of choice.” Recreation, then, is something that we enjoy, desire, and create for ourselves.

* **Self Reflection:** Consider Moon's six categories of leisure activities above. Do you take part in recreation or leisure activities that fit into any of these categories? Are there other categories your activities fit into? Share your responses with a friend or mentor.

STEP ONE: YOUR CURRENT RECREATION PROFILE

As you already know, every person is different with different abilities and interests. Not all activities are equally interesting or possible for everyone to take part in. We each have a recreation profile, even if you don't know it. Take a moment now to complete the survey titled “My Current Recreation Profile.” If you like, you can ask a friend or mentor to go through the questions with you. Or, if you're working solo and need some examples for how you can provide answers to the questions, refer to the sample. Remember, everyone is different, and your answers will probably vary greatly from other people you know, including family members or friends.



Another important point to keep in mind: your answers can't be wrong! In fact, the more you can share about yourself, the more you'll be able to navigate new choices or expand on activities you already enjoy doing. Just try to list the first thing that comes to mind, without thinking of what you may want to be doing.

My Current Recreation Profile

Name:

Date:

Question	Your Answer
1. Who do you recreate with?	
2. What activities do you choose and why?	
3. When do you recreate?	
4. Where do you recreate?	
5. Why do you recreate and what benefits do you obtain from the recreation?	
6. Most important, who makes all the choices regarding your recreational activities?	

My Current Recreation Profile

Name:

Date:

Question	Your Answer
1. Who do you recreate with?	Many of us would answer that we "play" with our friends, family members, club members, in groups, or sometimes alone.
2. What activities do you choose and why?	These are activities you enjoy and have an interest in doing. They are fun or pleasurable for you to do. They give you a sense of accomplishment, belonging, or friendship.
3. When do you recreate?	After work, after school, at lunch, on weekends, in the evening, during the early morning, only on certain days of the week, or when you have a spare moment.
4. Where do you recreate?	At the park, YMCA or gym, golf course, book club, library, race track, opera, theater, pool hall, club meeting, concert, traveling, etc.
5. Why do you recreate and what benefits do you obtain from the recreation?	To be physically fit, to have fun, to travel, to be with friends, to relax, to learn how to do something, to calm down, etc.
6. Most important, who makes all the choices regarding your recreational activities?	You!

*** Self Reflection:** Now that you have completed your current recreation profile, take a moment to reflect on the benefits you recorded in question #5. Anything that makes your life happier, richer, healthier, or more fun is significant. In fact, the benefits we obtain from recreation can be central to our well-being. Many people would claim they feel more "in touch" with others when they recreate. Is this true for you? It's good to remember any of these positive aspects of your recreation preferences, especially because you might discover that you can experience similar benefits from new activities you haven't tried or learned about yet!

*** Self Reflection:** Next, think about your answer to #6 above. According to Moon's definition of recreation, an element of choice must be involved. Have you ever been in a situation when someone else made your recreation choices for you? If so, what was it like? How did it feel to you? When you were younger and attending school, teachers, therapists, or family members might have made decisions for you based on assumptions or on what they themselves had an interest in doing, rather than in your real interests. At other times, you might not have been aware of the opportunities that were available to you, and still in other instances, you might have avoided activities that seemed uncomfortable or maybe even scary to you. Alternatively, can you remember a time when you were offered a choice? What was it like? How did it feel to you? No matter what your past experiences might have been, because you're currently thinking about going to college or because you're already in college, you will need some tools for identifying your needs and options more independently than you probably have in the past. If this all feels new or scary to you, that's OK! Remember, the point of recreating is to enhance your quality of life. You're the one in charge here, and you can take each step at your own pace. All you have to do is be true to yourself! When you do this, you are actually joining the rising number of people with disabilities who are practicing what is called "self-determination." Self-determination is an important movement that promotes the principles of autonomy and responsibility. By completing the steps in this article, you are taking steps toward becoming a self-determined individual. Congratulations!



STEP TWO: IDENTIFYING YOUR LEISURE INTERESTS

College or university life is filled with daily choices. In a new environment, there are lots of options of recreation or other leisure pursuits. Sometimes the numerous opportunities are so overwhelming that you might need help to figure out what your interests and needs really are.

This can seem like a huge task, but you are not alone. Almost every college student goes through the same experience when learning of all the new activities and clubs in their environment. It takes them time to figure out what they want, just as it will take you a bit of time. Identifying your needs and interests can be a collaborative effort that includes mentors or friends. They may have some insight on your personality or know of other options you might never have thought of trying. By sampling different activities, you can find out what you like without making a lifetime commitment. Some of us may not have ideas about leisure outlets we'd like to pursue because we have had little or no opportunity to experience a variety of activities in the past, we had limited access to them, or just never thought about changing up our routine. Sometimes the activities available to you can help spark your interest and motivate you.

Keep in mind that the exploration is meant to enhance your happiness, sense of belonging, or even your health. This article is to help alleviate some of the inevitable stress that new situations tend to bring upon us. The next step is to find out what options are available. This can be done a variety of ways and depends upon how you learn or process information best.

* **Self Reflection:** *Take a moment to think about how you process information best. Do you do well when you can have a conversation with a friend, a teacher, or a mentor to explore your interest? Is it helpful when you can observe different types of activities, without having to make a commitment, simply to watch? Also consider asking someone to join you to investigate, or, if you prefer, you can go alone. You can also read brochures and other print sources or do research on the web. Many colleges now have official Facebook sites where this can be done easily and efficiently. Recreation sampling may be another option. Sampling may include a visit to a ceramics shop, working out at a gym, or testing a bicycle. It allows you to obtain additional information to make an informed choice by testing out the activity. Sometimes, we have to actually do things in order to know whether we like or dislike them. As you proceed through the next steps of this chapter, make sure you give yourself the opportunity to navigate choices in the ways you learn or process information well. This will give you the best information possible for making choices, and the people who you ask for assistance or collaborative input, will have a better idea of how to support you in doing the things YOU like to do! Discuss your preferred ways of learning with a friend or mentor.*

* **Self Reflection:** *As you survey your options, don't forget about recreation activities you already enjoy. Are there opportunities for continuing with these interests on campus or in the community? Also, consider whether you might want to expand on a recreation area you already have experience with. For example, if you are already engaged in an interest such as music, you might want to find ways to expand on what you already do. The same could go for hiking, traveling, or cooking. These are actually huge categories that you can break down into many aspects. Music, for example, can be broken down into many types of activities: learning genres of music, studying artists, listening to recorded music, writing reviews or blogs, playing an instrument, going to concerts in arenas or smaller venues, looking at music books, going online to check for information, or watching music videos. With a friend or mentor, share or explore ways that you can expand on a leisure activity you already do.*

Now that you have an understanding of your current recreation profile, how you process information best, and the areas of interest you might like to expand on, you can begin to explore your community for recreation activities and outlets. "Community" can mean many things and be many places. There are "community" options through your college or university, such as clubs, sport teams or classes, music and choir, drama, peer support groups, or other activities. There are also options in your town or city, such as local organizations, or neighborhood and volunteer groups. When beginning to investigate your options, it's always a good idea to define the parameters of the community you wish to explore first. Will you seek out opportunities on campus, or off campus as well? Finding information can vary for each arena, but there is also some overlap.

The College/University Community

A university or college setting can provide you with numerous options for leisure and recreational activities. At the beginning of every academic year, most colleges organize activity fairs. At these fairs, different clubs or organizations from the college have displays to showcase what they are all about and try to attract more members.

Before you go to one of these fairs, it is best to try to figure out what type of club you would like to belong to. Some types of clubs focus on diversity and multiculturalism, politics, fine arts, club sports, student media, and religion to name a few. By asking other students what groups they belong to, you can get an idea of what others do in their free time.



If you'd prefer to do research on your own, a college or university's web site will have listings of the clubs on campus. These days, most clubs also have their own websites with information or pictures of their recent activities. Something else on these websites is contact information for club leaders. If an initial one-on-one interaction is too stressful, an email expressing your interest in a club can be very easy.

There is other information schools offer that can be useful in beginning a search. Campus maps can give you an idea of where different clubs meet and can allow you to prepare in advance for where to go to meet people. You may be surprised that some clubs meet in your own dorm or near the dining hall around meal times. If going by yourself to a new club seems too difficult, ask a friend if they want to go with you. If you know someone who is already part of the club, ask if you can go with them to their meeting.

Common areas on campus are also a place where people post information about new clubs and activities. These activities may be from a school group or a group in the surrounding area. Flyers, posters, pamphlets, and handouts can seem overwhelming if there are too many of them. It is perfectly alright to just stand in front of a board or space, out of the way of others, and read the different notices. Other students do the same thing to know what is going on. Just remember to only write down information and not take any of the papers unless they are given to you by another student.

The last frontier in communication are social media websites. Many college groups have their own Page and Events on Facebook. Like websites, this can be an easy way to see what the group is up to and be instantly connected. By joining or becoming a fan of the group, their updates will come into your news feed. This can't replace the human interaction that needs to happen, but it can make the joining easier.



The Community in General

In addition to the school campus, communities off campus offer an array of recreational opportunities for everyone to enjoy. If those options aren't readily apparent, the local library may have a list of area groups that meet, the newspaper may have listings of clubs or organizations in the community, the town websites may have information, and churches are potential outlets too. You might consider becoming a volunteer in the community through different associations or find out what is happening through the Parks and Recreation Department. In some cities, public television stations list community organizations, including times, locations, and contact information. You can also talk to people about different activities and find out how to get connected to those that interest you.

Most colleges have outreach programs to connect students to volunteer opportunities in the local community. Some clubs regularly make trips to volunteer together as a group, so ask around. You can also seek out your local autism advocacy organizations. Many times, it takes sitting down with local resource people, conducting research online or in the library, and scanning lists before your ideas become formulated. Just reading a list of local community resources may trigger creative thinking regarding ways in which to access and utilize options you never thought of before. If you don't have an "Ah ha!" moment, keep looking for options. Some activities are only seasonal or may not start up until a few weeks or months into the school year. By continuously looking for activities, you will find the right one for you.

Initiating Your Own Group

Finally, if you have an interest area that you share with others and there is no recreational outlet for it on campus or in the community, perhaps starting a club may be an option. Chances are, there are others in the community who would enjoy the same type of group themselves and merely need to have notice about a new club, organization, or activity. All organizations start somewhere, and there is no rule that says you cannot start your own! Talk to other students with similar interests to begin to form a group. Each school has a different process of creating a group and most school will offer help forming a new group. Feel free to talk to older students or students already in other groups to find out what you need to do. It may take a bit of time, but if you want the group to happen, you need to put some initial work into creating it. Once it is started, spread the word through the newspaper, Internet, campus announcements, bulletin boards, or word of mouth.

Now you're ready to begin collecting information for your survey. Use the worksheet titled "My Campus and Community Recreation Survey" to keep track of your discoveries. Challenge yourself to finding at least ten options, and feel free to do more if you like.

My Campus and Community Recreation Survey			
Name:			
Date:			
Activities, facilities, clubs or other outlets I found	Is the outlet on campus or off campus?	Notes and impressions	My interest in pursuing this activity further 1 2 3 4 5 Not at all Maybe Definitely
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

Make sure you investigate a mix of on and off campus options. Remember, the point is to find out what's out there. You don't need to feel any pressure about making commitments or decisions. Once you record an activity or outlet, keep a few notes on your first impressions, and, on a scale of 1–5, rate your level of interest. Is this activity something you might wish to learn more about and possibly join? Try not to think too much about the details. That will come in step 3.

* **Self Reflection:** Review all the recreation opportunities you included in your survey. Which are your top three choices, based on the rating scale you used? Share this with a friend or mentor.

STEP THREE: ASSESSING AN ACTIVITY OR RECREATION OUTLET

Once you have discovered what is available within your community both on and off campus, you can begin to narrow down your search and focus on specifics, including your personal needs for participating in a club, activity, or other recreation outlet. Use the “Recreation Outlet Profile” to investigate 1–3 of the top interest areas you identified in the previous section. You will need to use one worksheet for each activity or outlet. As you gather information, you might find you'll need to do further research by going online, emailing a club member, making a phone call or asking someone to assist you in making a phone call, or visiting the program or activity to observe or sample it. Once you have answered the essential questions (such as, “When does the activity take place? Are there dues or fees? What should you wear?”), fill out the additional columns of the worksheet, alone or with a friend or support person, to assess your specific personal needs and preferences with regard to the activity, club, organization, or outlet you are investigating. When you have a completed worksheet, have a copy of your class listing next to it to compare the two. Some groups may meet during one of your class times. Will that impact if you can participate in the club?

As you complete your research, some questions you might want to ask yourself or discuss with others might include: What is your best processing mode for this particular activity? Are there routines in this activity or outlet that need to be amended in order for you to feel comfortable socially or in the sensory environment? Do you need other resources, and if so, how accessible are they? Do you need support in planning, initiating, and maintaining the activity, and if so, who will you ask to assist you and how will this be done? Are there skills you need to learn or practice to become involved? What is expected socially in this environment, and do you need support in navigating it? Do you have feelings of anxiety? Would it be helpful to learn how to manage anxious feelings? Do you need to figure out transportation issues or how you will pay the fees or membership dues? You don't have to answer all of these questions, and you can include other types of information that come to mind, too. The main thing to know is that the more detail you can find, the more you'll be able to make good choices and plan for your participation. Turning to a mentor, friend, or support person can be extremely helpful in getting as many details as you can, as well as in finding creative solutions for addressing your specific needs. For example, if you know that loud environments can be challenging for you, you might want to learn strategies for coping when an unpredictable noise or loud situation occurs, or you might bring tools—such as earplugs or noise canceling headphones—with you to the activity or club. Or, if you're someone who finds changes in routines challenging, you may need to gather ongoing and accurate information about the schedule or have someone help you practice strategies for reducing anxiety that may be associated with unexpected changes. The worksheet provides space for you to brainstorm these ideas on your own or with others.

* **Self Reflection:** There are relationships that each of us has in our lives. These are allies, such as friends, co-workers, mentors or family members, who can assist in problem-solving or building bridges in order to participate in an activity or club. Who are the people in your life who can support you in pursuing or expanding your recreation options?

* **Self Reflection:** In other instances, you might find out it's best to turn to others you don't know well or at all for support. This might be the case if you discover that you would like to learn or practice skills in order to participate in the activity or recreation outlet you have chosen. A counselor, teacher, or coach might be good sources. Likewise, the student services office is sometimes helpful in providing information and connections to key people or offices you need to know or visit. Additional possibilities are your local Autisms Society chapter, community leaders, or state federal agencies. Which of these supports might be helpful to you now or in the future?

Recreation Outlet Profile

Name: _____ **Outlet or Activity:** _____
Date: _____

Questions	My Answers	What I need to do to fulfill this requirement or address this item	Will I do this alone or with support?	Support I need (people, strategies, tools) to address this item	Skills I need to learn or practice to address this item
Who are the members or participants of this activity or outlet?					
Is membership formal or informal?					
How often does this activity take place? When does this club or outlet meet? Are meetings regularly scheduled?					
Where does this activity or outlet take place?					
What goes on in this outlet, in these meetings or activities? What do people do here? Are there any recurring activities?					
How are the meetings or activities conducted?					
What is the appropriate dress for this outlet, event or activity?					

Recreation Chart continued next page...

Recreation Outlet Profile

Name:

Outlet or Activity:

Date:

Questions	My Answers	What I need to do to fulfill this requirement or address this item?	Will I do this alone or with support?	Support I need (people, strategies, tools) to address this item	Skills I need to learn or practice to address this item
What is the social environment here? Do people know each other? What are the social expectations in this environment?					
What is the sensory environment here? Is it quiet/loud? Are there smells or lighting that are challenging for me, etc?					
Am I able to participate in all the activities or some of them? Can I participate entirely or partially?					

STEP FOUR: CHOOSE, REVIEW, REFLECT

After you have completed your Recreation Outlet Profile, choose one activity, club, or group you wish to participate in. If you are torn between two activities, try one and then the other. You may be able to do both or only one. That is alright, you will have many opportunities to try new things. Make sure your plan for participating, including addressing all your personal needs, are well organized in the profile. This makes it easy for you or your friends and mentors to share with others. Good luck and enjoy!

- * **Self Reflection:** After you have begun participating in an activity or club, return to your Recreation Outlet Profile regularly to review and revise as needed.
- * **Self Reflection:** At the end of the semester, go back to the first worksheet titled “My Current Recreation Profile.” Compare it to your leisure activities and recreation now. How have things changed in your life regarding recreation? Share this with a friend or mentor. Would you like to explore new activities, or expand others you are currently involved in? If so, how? What would you have done differently? Why?

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