



Gibbons (left) and Blackstock.

# Exercise for Life

## Keeping teenage women in PE classes

By Becky Lockhart

Give young women a say in what gets their hearts racing, and chances are they'll be more willing to sweat it out in Grade 11 and 12 physical education classes. This is what four UVic researchers found when they teamed up to reverse the trend of fewer young women enrolling in PE when it becomes optional in senior high school.

"If women learn to exercise regularly at a young age and sustain it through their teens, the research often shows they'll be likely to find time to exercise for the rest of their lives," says UVic's Dr. Sandra Gibbons, explaining why the trend concerns researchers. Only 10 per cent of female students in BC take PE in Grades 11 and 12, compared to 20–25 per cent of male students.

Gibbons and fellow physical education professors Drs. Geraldine Van Gyn, Joan Wharf Higgins, and Catherine Gaul joined forces three years ago to explore the rea-

sons for low female enrolment and help teachers change their PE classes to appeal more to females. Says Gibbons, "There's plenty of info on why it happens. We wanted to take it to the next step and help teachers make change."

All four researchers have an interest in adolescent females and physical activity, but they come at the interest from different disciplines within physical education. Their research was made possible in part by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

The first step involved talking to a number of female students from various schools in Victoria.

Says Gibbons, "We found out that young women would like to be active; however, they are interested in a variety of physical activities beyond team sports." As one discussion participant who chose to not take PE-11 put it,

"Grade 8–10 PE was awful—repetitive, skill-oriented, boring and not much fun, so why would you want to take it as an option?"

In total, eight distinct issues influencing student's decisions to enroll in PE emerged from the analysis of the discussions. These included: more choice and control in determining the physical activities, emphasis on participation/effort rather than skill performance in determining grades, and having PE valued as an important pursuit by school staff and easier to fit into a class schedule.

The researchers used this information as a guide for curriculum change, working with PE teachers at Vic High, Stelly's Secondary and Reynolds Secondary. Teachers developed action plans for their programs and implemented them.

Vic High's Donna Blackstock realized that because she was teaching at a senior high, she needed to communicate more effectively with the young women in the feeder schools. "Half the reason they weren't taking the class was because they didn't know about it," says Gibbons, adding that Blackstock visited the feeder schools to promote her PE class.

Blackstock also created a female-only PE class attracting a full enrollment of students in its first year. In addition, enrollment of female students in Blackstock's regular co-ed PE-11 class increased. The researchers are still following the progress of the Vic High project, which is going into its third year this September.

"Basically, you want to build exercise into a person's life early on, and make sure it will always be a part of their life," says Gibbons. "Adolescence seems to be crucial time because it's when we first start making choices and take responsibility for our lives. If you start missing out on exercise then, it's difficult to return to it later."



Becky Lockhart wrote this as a participant in the SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), funded by UVic, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

### facts from the **EDGE**

What gets young women moving? The researchers found that the focus groups of young women all expressed an interest in changing PE course content in four areas:

- an emphasis on personal fitness activities (e.g., aerobics, weight training, self defense);
- physical activity certification opportunities (e.g., fitness leadership, national coaching levels);
- outdoor recreation activities like canoeing and hiking;
- opportunities to use community recreation facilities.

The research team also studied the National Population Health Survey for 1996–9, and explored the factors influencing the levels of physical activity for Canadian youth aged 12–24. Young women were found to be less physically active, more concerned about being overweight, more depressed, and to consult mental health professionals more frequently than young men. They also smoked more than males during the early and middle teenage years and drank an equivalent amount of alcohol. Physical activity increased for both sexes with household income, school attendance, and social involvement, and decreased with concern about weight and with increased smoking.

### sharpen your knowl**EDGE**

ProMotion Plus is a Vancouver-based organization that aims to ensure that all girls and women in physical activity and sport in BC have access to a complete range of choices and opportunities and become fully participatory and actualize their potential. It works cooperatively with individuals and groups in the sport and recreation system in British Columbia to create equity for girls and women. Its Web site provides information on a variety of programs and services. [www.promotionplus.org](http://www.promotionplus.org)

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) is a national not-for-profit organization that works in partnership with Sport Canada and with Canada's sport and active living communities to achieve gender equity in the sport community. CAAWS works to "encourage girls and women to get out of the bleachers, off the sidelines, and onto the fields and rinks, into the pools, locker rooms and board rooms of Canada." [www.caaws.ca](http://www.caaws.ca)

The Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CAHPERD) is a national organization whose primary concern is to influence the healthy development of children and youth by advocating for quality, school-based physical and health education. [www.cahperd.ca](http://www.cahperd.ca)

