

Bentley University Fitness Areas:
A Preliminary Study

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With the large amount of health benefits people receive from being active, it's a pity to see a large mass of people unwilling to make time to exercise. Some people believe that they cannot make time for exercise in their busy schedules. Others lack the motivation to get started and keep a steady regimen. I want to focus on the latter group of people, as instilling the habit of exercise early on is more beneficial to them in the long run. Bentley University provides free usage of their athletic facility for students and faculty, but how many people actually use these facilities? How many **people** are squandering essentially a free gym membership? Is there a **Grad? Undergrad? Faculty? Staff?** way that the athletic facility can attract more people who will utilize their machines? These were just a few questions I'm looking to answer in this Ethnographic Study.

Bentley University mainly hosts their exercise options at the Dana Physical Education Center. Some areas that are available for students and faculty include a weight room, a cardio area, a dance studio, and a pool. The weight room and cardio area are connected by a staircase, with a small room with glass walls to store belongings at the base of the staircase.  Students enter through the weight room and have their Bentley ID card swiped before they enter to verify that they're allowed into the facility. There are two takeout-style restaurants across from the weight room. One specializes in breakfast and brunch food, while the other serves burritos, salads, and smoothies. As of the time of this writing, I have yet to examine the nutritional value of these restaurants.  Nearby, the field house contains a basketball court surrounded by a running track.  The bleachers are folded into the wall and cover up the running track.  Down the hall, there are bathrooms and locker rooms for changing, and some of these locker rooms are connected to the pool. Tucked away in the halls is a dance studio, where fitness classes are hosted for an extra fee. The weight room and cardio area are the focus of this preliminary study.

During this preliminary study, the facilities were examined twice during the last two weeks of January, both during a weekday rather than during the weekend. The first observation began at 7:45am and continued until 10:30am, while the second observation took place from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm at a later date. There are several reasons for not keeping a consistent observation schedule when it comes to the time of day for the preliminary workout schedule, mostly related to what time of day works best for patrons. Firstly, there are different advantages from the health and social standpoint between a morning workout and an evening workout regimen (Cardiello, 2012). From a social standpoint, morning workouts seem to be better for those who are self-sufficient, while evening workouts are better for group workout sessions. In addition, with the vast number of different schedules from the patrons, I theorize that different type of people may appear at different study intervals.

Observation 1: The Morning Session

It has been a while since I woke before the sun rose when I went to do my first observation. While the warmth of my bed was enticing, I knew I needed to get to observing! I felt groggy as I was packing my gym bag with a towel, a change of gym clothes, and a bottle of water, in an attempt to get there as early as possible to observe the crowd. I started to drive, and realized I forgot my sneakers back home, so I had to turn back and pick them up. I made a note to remember to pack my bag the night before as I perform future morning ethnographic sessions.

When I finally arrived at the Dana Center with all my workout equipment, I found  parking lot behind the building. This parking lot appears to double as a set of courts for various sports ng the warmer months, due to the all the crossing lines resembling a basketball court on the asphalt. Interestingly, the parking lines were far more faded than the court lines, which

made finding a legitimate parking spot confusing. I pulled into what I hoped was a parking space, and entered the facility.

My first task was to find a place to change out of my winter clothing and into gym clothes. I walked around the facility, looking for a locker room for changing and for storing my things securely. I found a locker room that my Bentley ID would not let me into, but one of the people leaving the locker room let me in. While it looked like a typical bathroom, I could not find any lockers to store my winter clothing. It wasn't until I found the personalized lockers holding actual sports equipment that I realized that I entered the varsity sports locker room, and I won't find a place for my bag and jacket here.

I continued my search for a men's locker room for the general public, even going so far as to ask an attendant for directions. I went into the hallway she described and found two doors. The first door was locked by a circular key lock attached to the door. I believe this was another way to enter the men's locker room The other door lead to an area housing a bathroom and showers. There is also another door in this room which leads to the swimming pool. One thing this "locker room" appears to lack are the lockers themselves, making me think about why it isn't called a washroom instead. Giving up, I decided to change in the men's bathroom, and try to find a safe place to stash my stuff right by where I'm working out.

After changing, I entered the workout areas. It appeared that the attendant went to the bathroom, so I decided to walk right into the weight room. In the weight room, there were approximately 10-15 people. These people were mostly young men, with a few young women and one woman who looked to be in her 30's or 40's.

I witnessed a patron walk towards the stairs leading upstairs, but turn right before reaching the stairs themselves. In the glass room, he started to remove his sweatshirt and tearaway pants, revealing the lighter workout clothes he was wearing underneath. Apparently, it's in this part of the facility that normal patrons store their belongings while exercising. There is a long metal coat rack with shelves on the top and bottom to store items that couldn't be hung. This use for this room might only be apparent during the times of the year when the weather is colder, and I predict the room gets far less use when the weather heats up in the spring and summer. I will keep this thought in mind as I proceed through the study. For the time being though, I hung my jacket and threw my bag on the top shelf, as I tried to locate the cardio equipment. As I was thinking this, I heard footsteps from the floor above me along with the whirring of a small motor. Realizing that what I heard was a treadmill, I climbed the stairs, bringing only my phone to take notes, a towel, and a bottle of water.

The cardio room (see Figure 1) at the top of the stairs primarily contained 4 rows of equipment. The cardio equipment in these rows included treadmills, elliptical trainers, seated bike machines, and two stairmasters. The spacing between each machine varied, although the typical spacing was on the lower end (about a foot) rather than the larger end (approximately 6 feet). Most of these machines are all facing the same direction, with televisions displaying sports and political recaps on the screen that people can listen to while working out. The ones that aren't facing the televisions are looking out the window overlooking the field. There's also a small cubby where a short row of treadmills are placed, resembling a miniaturized version of the larger cardio area. In one of the corners, there are floor mats that give patrons an area to perform stretches. There is a water fountain right next to these mats. This allows people to fill up their

water bottles when they are empty. There are two columns in the middle of the room and there is a paper towel dispenser attached to one of the columns. Paper towels are provided for wiping sweat off the machines after use. Most of my observations were made while I was on a treadmill in the back row of the cardio area.



Figure 1: Bentley's Cardio Area. Image from 

<http://www.bentley.edu/undergraduate/admitted-students/student-blogs/syllabus-week>

There were about 10-15 people in this room throughout the morning of the study. Most of the people that came upstairs were female, with the gender ratio at any point fluctuating between 1:1 to 4:1. There were no patrons who looked overly unfit, but no one looked excessively active as well.  Observed a large variability in the amount of time spent stretching before working out. Some simply getting on the machine and starting their workout, while the

most extreme example on the opposite end of the spectrum was someone who used the stretching area for 5 minutes before starting her workout. All the people who used cardio equipment during this time were under 30 years old. There was generally an even distribution of usage between each type of workout equipment, although there were more people using treadmills than using the other equipment.

The only exception to the usage distribution was the 2 StairMasters that were hardly used, perhaps due to the low number of machines. This might be different if more StairMasters were present, as there was a short period of time when both machines were in use. I believe a more likely reason for the lack of usage is due to the high position a user would have to take to use such a machine, and the perceived risk of falling off this machine might deter people from using it.  witnessed a pair of men use the stairs between the weight room and cardio room to work out, continuously running up and down the stairs for several minutes. These people would rather use the stairs that they can actually climb rather than the StairMasters themselves.

Most people in this area came in separately and left separately, but on one or two occasions during the morning study, people came and went in pairs. I didn't observe many conversations during this time, because no one was conversing.

Upon realizing that people weren't speaking to each other in this area, I began to ask myself why people wouldn't be talking to each other, even if they appear to have a history with each other. A reasonable explanation for the silence during the workout is due to the concentration needed just to breathe properly while exercising.  Most people wore earbuds and listened to content (presumably music) from their phones. Most people chose to use equipment that didn't have another patron using the machine next to them. I hypothesize that these

individuals prefer to workout without distractions  so the lack of conversation while exercising is understandable.

However, I also observed limited verbal interaction when not on machines. One group of three women in particular walked in together, filled up their water bottles one after another, walked to adjacent machines, and simply put on their headphones before beginning their workout routine, all that without uttering a word. Another pair of women finished working out together on a pair of elliptical trainers in the corner, and one person fetched some paper towels for the pair of them. The second woman thanked the first and each wiped their respective machines down before leaving. I only saw them exchange a thanks while I was there, and didn't even say anything as they left together.

Perhaps the time of day was not right for these groups to be chatty, with many people depending on specific rituals such as drinking a cup of coffee before being “mentally there” and able to engage in conversation. Even when using adjacent machines, there is more distance created by being individuals on the cardio equipment than if people were walking together, and the extra space may require people to yell to communicate with each other. 

After an hour of simultaneous observation and movement on the treadmill, it was time for me to leave. Before I left, I felt the need to make at least a short preliminary observation of the weight room (See Figure 2). While the cardio room was organized into rows of equipment, the distribution of equipment in the weight room was more in separate groups. Most of the room is covered by equipment, with the exception of a small area with a floor mat for working out while lying on the ground. There were one or two people on the ground doing sit ups in this area during my preliminary observation.



Figure 2: The Weight Room at Bentley University. Image courtesy of

<http://www.youvisit.com/tour/panoramas/bentley/79865?id=8194>

The ergonomics of how the equipment is laid out doesn't seem to make sense from my standpoint. There are two sets of dumbbells, one set in the corner by the glass room and the other heavier set in the middle of the room. The free weight barbells are grouped together into two groups, with one set used for bench presses and the other for standing-based weight training with the barbell. Machines built to work out specific parts of the body appear to have been placed haphazardly. Why not group these machines based on the muscles the equipment is designed to strengthen? Would such a method of organization be possible? Perhaps I'm missing something during my first few observations, and will need to review how people use their machines in later observations.

In terms of people, there were mostly young males in this room, with the exception of two young women who were using the floor mat and a weight on their chest for sit ups. Most of the people here looked to be of average muscle mass, and there was one person with slightly above average. There were more people socializing with each other in the weight room than in

the cardio area. However, I wasn't ready to say just yet that one room was more social than the other. Classes have begun at this point of the day, and perhaps some people don't talk until after class. As such, I took my leave, changed back to my street clothes in the bathroom, and proceeded through my day.

Observation 2: The Evening Session

The second time period for observation took place in the late afternoon into the early evening. I wore light workout clothing underneath a sweater, tearaway pants, and typical winter attire before leaving for the gym. There was a basketball game scheduled later that evening, so my previous parking place was blocked by police. I parked in a nearby lot, walked through some student housing, and entered the main entrance of the facility. This time, a person was here to swipe my card. I entered the glass room to remove my outer layer of clothing, and immediately knew there were more people here at this time. While I could easily find a hanger for my coat in the morning, there were no hangers available in the evening, and some winter gear was resting in the corner of the room. I decided to place my jacket on the top shelf along with my gym bag before I went upstairs for a short cardio session.

It wasn't until this observation that I realized yet another reason people didn't talk much in the cardio area. When I returned this time, there were easily at least 20 people using the machines at a given time and most of them were young women. Rather than the even distribution of machine usage observed in the morning, the evening crowd far preferred the treadmills in the back row, with every machine taken for a solid 15 minutes. This generated a whole lot of noise with the whirring of machines and feet stomping. This made it impossible to hear anything while in this room, so conversation would be difficult to maintain. While I did

witness three women talking to each other while walking in and out, it was difficult to ascertain what was being said. After half an hour, I proceeded downstairs to the weight room to continue observations.

While there were more people present in the weight room during this observation as opposed to the previous observation, there was a more even gender distribution than before, getting close to 2:3 at one point. Most of the people were under 30, but there were a few people that appeared to be well over 40. There were more people with above average muscle mass than during the morning observation, and one individual looked extremely strong. Some people worked out alone, while others worked out with at least one other person. Due to the closeness of one pair of individuals, it appeared that one of the pairs working out together were dating, but I didn't receive confirmation of this.

As I was using the dumbbells, I thought about some of the reasons people could be social in the weight room as opposed to the cardio area. The whirring motors and footsteps are replaced by the blowing of the ventilation system and the occasional clanking of metal as people put their weights down. This made the room quieter and therefore easier to engage in conversation. People are also able to get closer to each other, at least in the free weights area. Finally, there seemed to be a mutual benefit to working out with a friend in the weight room in the form of spotters. Some individuals like to push their own physical limits when working out, using what could be seen as an excessive amount of weight while doing specific exercises. To ensure that they don't get crushed by the weights they're using, another person observes the specific exercise to make sure the lifter is safe.

The conversations I managed to observe mainly focused on the workout routine the patrons are focused on for their workout session. One group of people talked about the technique for using the barbell properly, appearing to focus on one particular set of muscles. Another person was using a cell phone to show how to actually perform a certain exercise.

For one pair of patrons, it appeared that one person was more knowledgeable about exercises than the other. While one person sheepishly asked about how to proceed, the other emphatically barked out the next step.

“I finished the shrugs, what should I be doing next?”

“Run up and down the stairs, bro!”

“Wait, why should I be running at this point? I thought-”

 You should get a cardio break, bro. Run up and down the stairs for a few minutes.”

After a minute of questions and repeated answers, the sheepish one finally went to the stairs.

The other conversations mainly pertained to current events at the time. One or two conversations talked about the class they were taking. Other conversations pertained to current events, where some people talking about things Tom Brady said prior to the Super Bowl.

 anaged to briefly speak with two individuals while I was there. The first is a Master’s student who just started working out there this semester. She aims to go to the gym between 2-4 times a week, citing that she needed to start taking care of her body. She said the volume of work from the previous semester made her unable to attend the gym until this year.

The second person I talked to was a Professor at Bentley who talked about pushing himself to go to the gym. He emphatically brought up that he went to the gym because “It’s not

going to get better for me!”, laughing as he looked down at the slight gut that he had. I mentioned to him that I saw very few professors at the gym during my initial observations. I started to inquire if “Is it weird for professors and students-” “Yep” he quickly interjected.

 Most professors don’t really want to work out with their students.”

I concluded my day of observation by going to the glass room to gather my belongings. The professor I spoke to earlier entered about a minute after me. “Well, I’m tired now” he mentioned offhandedly to me as he was gathering his bag from off the floor.. “Time to head back home.”

I was curious about why people used this area as a storage room, so I decided to get his input. “Bentley technically has lockers” he informed me. “But they don’t allow people to put actual locks on them. It’s generally fine for students who are undergraduates since they can leave their stuff in their dorms. But the Grad students can’t store their things there. You should  Bentley know as you are doing your study that this is a common complaint I hear.”

Would graduate students and professors be more likely to go to the gym at Bentley if there was a secure place to store their belongings? Do these folks work out on off-campus facilities rather than what is provided on-campus? If so, why? These were some of the questions I had as I left the facility.

Ideas for the Future

There is still information that should be gathered to gather further insights into getting more people to work out. The true motivations for not working out are not fully formed yet. Speaking to a few students who don’t work out might be advised. In addition, are there ways for someone who is new to working out to start getting into a fitness routine that is right for them?

Talking to a few people in the gym concerning proper technique might also be necessary. Does Bentley need to raise awareness that their gyms are a legitimate place to work out? What are some of the possible reasons that Bentley faculty and students don't use Bentley's workout facilities? Do the off-campus students and faculty members have a preferred gym they prefer to do their workout routines? Even more questions to ask current and former grad students.

Sources

Cardiello, J. (2012, Sep) Which is Better: A.M. vs. P.M. Workouts. Retrieved from <http://www.shape.com/blogs/fit-list-jay-cardiello/which-better-am-vs-pm-workouts>

Good start. Don't get hung up on trying to understand "why" things are happening. The more you get into it, that will be revealed (and the reasons are likely layered). The larger thing here is whether there is a "wellness culture" on campus. HR tries to initiate a variety of wellness activities throughout the year. What are their challenges? This idea of a corporate wellness culture might be a good frame to put on this, at least for now. You could start looking into that as you are going on with your observations.

9.5 / 10