

Can recreational sports really make you a better student?

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A new Michigan State University study adds to growing evidence that participating in recreational sports not only can help improve grades while attending college, but it also can help students return for another year.

Among nearly 1,800 recent freshmen at MSU, students who played intramural sports averaged a 3.25 [grade point average](#) at the end of their first year compared to a 3.07 GPA for those who didn't play.

But it's more than just better grades. Those who participated in recreational sports were less likely to drop or fail any classes their first year and were 40% more likely to move onto sophomore status. They also were 2.5 times more likely to come back to the university.

The findings are published in the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*.

It takes 120 credit hours to graduate with a bachelor's degree, and to graduate in four years,

you need a total of 30 completed credit hours each [school year](#).

"At the end of the year, students who played sports dropped or failed a total average of six credits compared to 7.7 credits among non-playing students," said Kerri Vasold, lead author and a recent graduate of MSU's kinesiology Ph.D. program.

Vasold said that the almost two credit difference each year can have a big effect overall on the time it takes to graduate, and even more importantly, how much damage the pocketbook takes.

The research takes an apples-to-apples approach and brings the most solid evidence to date that intramural sports play an important role in a [student](#)'s success. Previous research has relied mostly on survey results, but Vasold dug deeper and was able to pull hard numbers from MSU's registrar office.

Students were matched based on factors including high school GPA, gender, race, socioeconomic status, if they lived on campus, and if they were a first-generation student. Then they were compared to whether they participated in intramural sports.

"The only thing that was different between these students was whether they played or not," said Jim Pivarnik, a professor of kinesiology and co-author of the study. "Everything else was matched."

Pivarnik said the strength of the study was how tightly controlled it was.

"You can't just say one person was smarter in high school than the other or his or her socioeconomic status was better," he said. "We addressed all that, with all things being equal."

So how many extracurricular sports should you do?

According to the researchers, the sweet spot seems to be anywhere between four to seven different activities throughout the year, which is new data discovered in another soon-to-be-published study led by Vasold and Pivarnik.

"Don't go crazy. Don't join 20 teams," Pivarnik said. "Grab some friends, find a moderate number of activities and get involved in something different. The four-to-seven range seems to be effective and is linked to a higher GPA."

Activities can range from playing an intramural sport like ultimate frisbee a few times a month to taking an aerobics class at a fitness center each week.

Currently, about 10,000, or 20%, of MSU students participate in intramural sports, which is slightly higher than the national average of 17%, according to the American College Health Association.

"There are so many different ways to participate," Vasold said. "And the best part is you don't have to be an all-star basketball player or have played ultimate frisbee before. You can still join a team. It's an inclusive environment and helps students do better and creates a new home."

More information: Kerri L. Vasold et al, Academic Success and 1 Year of Intramural Sports Participation by Freshmen Students, *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1521025119833000](https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119833000)

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