

From Campus Running Participation to Exercise Habit Formation: Pathways of Motivational Transformation

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Abstract

Campus running has become a common form of organized physical activity in universities, but regular participation does not necessarily lead to a lasting exercise habit. Many students begin running because of course requirements, mileage targets, or assessment rules, which can create stable participation for a period of time without producing a strong willingness to exercise independently. This paper examines how motivation may change during this process and why such change is important for the formation of exercise habits. It argues that the transition from external participation to sustained exercise depends on whether students gradually recognize the personal value of exercise, experience competence and enjoyment, and gain greater control over their own physical activity. Excessive reliance on distance, frequency, and completion-based assessment may keep running at the level of task fulfillment and weaken this transition. A more effective approach is to use campus running as an initial structure for participation while gradually increasing autonomy, improving exercise experience, and connecting running with broader forms of independent physical activity. The value of campus running, therefore, should not be judged only by completed mileage or participation rates, but also by whether it helps students continue exercising when external requirements are reduced or removed.

Keywords: campus running, exercise habit, exercise motivation, autonomous motivation, physical activity participation, university students

1. Introduction

Campus running has become a common part of university physical education and extracurricular exercise programs. It is usually organized through fixed running distances, required participation frequency, digital tracking, or links with physical education assessment. For students who do not exercise regularly, this arrangement can provide a clear starting point. It gives them a reason to move, creates a repeated exercise

schedule, and places physical activity into daily campus life. In this sense, campus running can help increase exercise participation, especially among students who might otherwise remain inactive.

Yet regular participation does not always mean that an exercise habit has been formed. A student may complete the required running distance throughout a semester and stop exercising once the requirement is removed. Another student

may continue running, adjust the exercise schedule independently, or even move from running to other forms of physical activity. The difference between these two outcomes is not simply the amount of exercise completed. It also reflects how students understand exercise and what motivates them to continue.

This distinction is important because exercise habits are usually more stable than short-term participation. Habit formation involves repeated behavior, but repetition alone is not enough. Students also need to see exercise as relevant to their own health, daily routine, or personal goals. They need to feel that the activity is manageable and, at least to some degree, worth doing for its own sake. When running remains mainly connected with grades, attendance, mileage requirements, or digital check-ins, participation may depend heavily on external control. The behavior can be maintained for a period of time, but its continuation becomes uncertain once that control is weakened.

The question, then, is not whether campus running can make students run more during university. In many cases, it clearly can. A more meaningful issue is whether this form of organized participation can support a change in exercise motivation. Students may begin because they have to run, but some gradually recognize the physical and psychological value of exercise, gain confidence in their own ability, and develop a stronger sense of choice. When this happens, the motive for participation may shift from simple compliance toward more autonomous forms of exercise. Such a shift is closely connected with the possibility of maintaining physical activity beyond formal requirements.

This paper focuses on that motivational transition. It examines the gap between campus running participation and exercise habit formation, the motivational conditions that may support movement from externally regulated participation to more autonomous exercise, and the reasons why this process sometimes fails. Particular attention is given to the role of exercise experience, perceived competence, autonomy, and the internalization of exercise value. The paper also considers how campus running can be designed not only as a system for completing required mileage, but as an entry point into broader and more sustainable physical activity.

Seen from this perspective, the long-term value of campus running lies less in how many kilometers

students complete and more in what happens to their motivation during repeated participation. If students leave the system with greater willingness and ability to exercise independently, campus running has moved beyond short-term behavioral control. If participation disappears as soon as the requirement ends, the transition from organized running to exercise habit has remained incomplete.

2. Campus Running and the Formation of Exercise Habits

Campus running creates a relatively stable structure for physical activity. Students are usually given a required number of runs, a minimum distance, or a period in which the task must be completed. Digital platforms also make participation easier to record. For students with little previous exercise experience, this kind of arrangement can reduce the difficulty of starting. The activity is already scheduled, the basic goal is clear, and repeated participation becomes possible without the student having to design an exercise plan independently.

This repeated behavior is important, but it should not be treated as the same thing as exercise habit formation. Campus running participation may remain strongly dependent on the university schedule, course assessment, or monitoring system. Students can appear physically active during the semester while still relying on these external conditions. Once the semester ends, the running requirement is removed, or the activity is no longer connected with a grade, the original pattern may disappear quickly. In such cases, repetition has occurred, but the behavior has not yet become part of the student's own exercise routine.

An exercise habit usually has a stronger element of continuity. The student begins to make time for exercise without needing repeated reminders and can adjust the activity according to personal circumstances. The form of exercise may also change. A student who starts with campus running may later choose jogging, cycling, gym exercise, or a team sport. What matters is not whether the same running task continues, but whether regular physical activity is maintained with less dependence on external supervision.

This distinction also changes how the effectiveness of campus running should be understood. Mileage and completion rates are easy to measure, so they often become the most visible indicators. They show whether students

have participated, but they reveal much less about what happens after participation. A student who completes all required runs but does not exercise afterward has had a different outcome from a student who completes fewer structured sessions yet gradually develops an independent exercise routine.

The link between the two therefore depends on more than behavioral repetition. Students need opportunities to understand their own physical responses, experience improvement, and develop some control over the way they exercise. Running may begin as a compulsory activity, but repeated exposure can also make exercise more familiar and less difficult. For some students, this creates the conditions for a more stable pattern of physical activity. For others, campus running remains a temporary requirement with a clear beginning and end.

The important issue is not simply whether campus running increases the amount of exercise during a semester. Its longer-term value depends on whether structured participation provides enough support for students to move toward more self-directed exercise. That transition is closely tied to motivation, which becomes the central issue once participation itself has been established.

3. The Motivational Starting Point of Campus Running Participation

For many university students, campus running does not begin as a fully self-chosen form of exercise. Participation is often connected with physical education requirements, running records, course grades, or a minimum number of completed sessions. This means that the first reason for running may be quite practical. Students run because the task has to be completed. From the perspective of exercise motivation, this is an important starting point rather than simply a weakness of campus running.

External requirements can help students cross the initial barrier to exercise. Some students already enjoy running or take part in sports regularly, but others have little experience of planned physical activity. For the latter group, the difficulty is often not only maintaining exercise but beginning it at all. A clear running requirement provides a fixed goal and reduces the need to make repeated decisions about whether to exercise. In this early stage, grades, attendance, mileage, and completion rules can work as

immediate reasons for participation even when personal interest in running is limited.

The campus running arrangement at Nanjing University of Finance and Economics provides a useful example. In the spring semester of 2026, first- and second-year students taking physical education were required to complete at least 30 campus runs, including no fewer than 10 morning runs. Minimum running distances and pace ranges were also specified, and failure to meet the extracurricular exercise requirement could affect the final physical education result. The runs were recorded through the BuDaoLePao application. Such a system gives students a clear and measurable reason to participate. It can bring regular running into the weekly routine even for those who might not have chosen to run on their own.

It would be too simple, however, to interpret externally motivated participation as the opposite of meaningful exercise. A compulsory starting point does not determine what motivation will look like later. Students may enter campus running because of assessment requirements but gradually encounter experiences that were not part of their original reason for participation. Running a familiar route may become easier after several weeks. A student who initially struggles to complete a short distance may notice improved endurance. Others may begin to value the feeling of physical relaxation after exercise or use running as a break from study. These experiences can give the activity a different meaning.

The important issue is what happens to the original motive once participation has become regular. If the student continues to think mainly about the remaining mileage or the number of runs needed for a passing grade, motivation remains closely tied to external regulation. Exercise is completed, but it is still treated as a task with an endpoint. When the requirement disappears, there may be little reason to continue. This helps explain why high participation during a semester cannot by itself be taken as evidence of a stable exercise habit.

The starting point can also differ considerably between students. Previous sport experience, physical fitness, confidence in running, and personal interest affect how the same requirement is experienced. A student with a strong exercise background may treat campus running as only one part of an existing routine.

For a less active student, the same requirement may feel difficult or intrusive at first. It may later become manageable, or it may continue to be associated with pressure and fatigue. The motivational effect of campus running is therefore not contained in the rule itself. It develops through the interaction between the external requirement and the student's actual experience of exercise.

For this reason, the role of external motivation in campus running is better understood as provisional. It can initiate repeated participation and expose students to regular physical activity, but it cannot guarantee that the reason for exercising will remain meaningful once institutional pressure is removed. The more difficult question is whether the student begins to accept the value of exercise as personally relevant and develops a stronger willingness to continue. That change marks the point at which campus running starts to move beyond required participation and toward autonomous exercise motivation.

4. From External Participation to Autonomous Exercise Motivation

4.1 Internalization of Exercise Value

The shift from externally required participation to more autonomous exercise does not usually happen at once. In campus running, students may continue to follow the same route and complete the same distance, while the meaning of the activity gradually changes. At the beginning, the main concern may be whether the required mileage has been reached. After repeated participation, some students begin to notice changes in their own bodies and daily state. Running becomes easier than it was during the first few weeks. Recovery is faster. A distance that once felt demanding may no longer produce the same level of fatigue. These small changes can alter how students understand the activity.

This is where the internalization of exercise value begins. The value of running is no longer limited to its connection with a course requirement. Students may start to associate exercise with better physical condition, relief from study pressure, improved mood, or a greater sense of energy during the day. These benefits do not have to be dramatic. In many cases, it is the repeated experience of feeling slightly better after exercise that makes the activity seem personally worthwhile. The reason for running is still partly external, but it is no longer entirely external.

This distinction matters. Telling students that exercise is good for health does not necessarily lead to value internalization. Most university students already know that regular physical activity is beneficial. The difficulty lies in turning this general knowledge into a reason that has personal meaning. A student may understand the health benefits of running in abstract terms and still feel little desire to participate. The value becomes more concrete when it is connected with an experience the student can recognize: completing a distance that previously felt difficult, sleeping better after exercise, feeling less restless after a long day of study, or noticing that regular running makes other physical activities easier.

Campus running can provide the repeated exposure needed for this process, but repetition alone is not sufficient. If each session is experienced mainly as pressure, fatigue, or the need to complete another digital record, the student may learn very little about the value of exercise beyond compliance. In that case, running remains meaningful because it leads to a grade or prevents a penalty. The activity has been repeated, but its value has not been fully accepted as part of the student's own goals.

The way exercise is experienced is therefore central to internalization. A reasonable running load can allow students to notice progress without creating excessive physical strain. Some flexibility in pace and scheduling can also make it easier for students to connect exercise with their own condition rather than with a fixed external standard. When students begin to understand why a certain level of running is appropriate for them, they are more likely to view exercise as something that can be managed rather than endured.

Personal relevance is also important. Students do not necessarily value running for the same reason. One may care about cardiovascular fitness, another about body weight, and another may simply enjoy having time away from academic work. These differences do not weaken the process of habit formation. In fact, they can make exercise more sustainable because the activity is linked to a reason the student actually accepts. Internalization does not require everyone to develop a strong passion for running. It means that exercise begins to serve a purpose that the student recognizes as his or her own.

At this stage, the motivational change is still incomplete. Students may continue to rely on external requirements, especially when running feels difficult or when academic demands increase. Yet the basis of participation has already begun to shift. Exercise is no longer carried out only because the university requires it. It has acquired personal value, even if that value remains mixed with grades, mileage targets, or other forms of external regulation. This mixed state is important because it creates the possibility for a further transition toward more autonomous motivation.

4.2 The Development of Autonomous Motivation

Recognizing the value of exercise does not automatically make exercise autonomous. A student may believe that running is good for health and still participate mainly because of course requirements. The next stage of motivational change is more demanding. Students need to feel that exercise is increasingly connected with their own decisions, abilities, and experiences rather than being something imposed from outside. This is where autonomous motivation begins to develop.

Self-determination theory provides a useful way to understand this process. It suggests that motivation becomes more self-directed when people experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in an activity. In campus running, these needs are not abstract psychological conditions. They appear in ordinary exercise situations. A student may feel more autonomous when there is some freedom to choose when to run or how to arrange the pace. Competence may grow when repeated running makes the same distance easier or when students become better at controlling breathing and rhythm. Relatedness can emerge when running is shared with classmates, friends, or a small exercise group rather than experienced as an isolated requirement.

Among these factors, autonomy is especially important. Campus running usually contains a degree of external control because universities need some way to organize and assess participation. The problem is not the existence of rules itself. The problem appears when almost every aspect of running is externally determined. If students are told exactly how far to run, how fast they must run, when the run counts, and which route is valid, they may have little reason to treat the activity as their own. They learn how

to satisfy the system rather than how to manage exercise independently.

Giving students more choice does not mean removing all structure. For students who have not yet formed regular exercise habits, complete freedom may simply lead to inactivity. A more realistic approach is to keep a basic framework while allowing room for personal adjustment. Students might still need to complete a certain amount of weekly exercise, but they could have greater flexibility in selecting running time, pace, route, or training goal. The difference may appear small, but it changes the way responsibility is experienced. Exercise begins to involve personal decision-making rather than simple obedience.

Competence develops in a different way. Running can easily produce negative experiences for students with low fitness levels. A fixed pace that feels comfortable for one student may be exhausting for another. When repeated participation is accompanied by failure, excessive fatigue, or embarrassment, the activity may confirm a belief that the student is “not good at sports.” Under these conditions, external requirements may keep the person running for a semester, but they are unlikely to create a strong desire to continue.

Positive changes in perceived ability can have the opposite effect. A student who notices that two kilometers can now be completed without stopping has gained more than physical endurance. The student also receives evidence that improvement is possible. This sense of progress matters because autonomous motivation is easier to maintain when exercise feels manageable and personally achievable. The experience of competence can gradually shift attention away from the requirement itself. Students begin to care not only about whether the run has been recorded, but also about how they performed and how their body responded.

The social environment also shapes this change. Campus running is often treated as an individual task because each student has a separate account and personal mileage record. In practice, however, exercise can become more meaningful when it is shared. Running with friends may reduce boredom and make the activity less formal. Informal encouragement from classmates can also make difficult sessions easier to complete. This does not mean that social interaction should replace personal motivation.

Rather, a supportive exercise environment can help students feel that physical activity is part of ordinary campus life instead of an isolated academic requirement.

Autonomous motivation is therefore not the same as strong enthusiasm for running. Some students may never enjoy running itself very much. They may still choose to exercise because they value physical fitness, stress relief, or the feeling of maintaining control over their health. This kind of motivation can also be relatively autonomous. The important point is that the reason for participation has been accepted by the student rather than simply imposed by an external authority.

This distinction helps explain why the same campus running program can produce very different outcomes. Two students may complete exactly the same mileage, yet their motivational states may be quite different. One may be counting the remaining sessions until the requirement ends. The other may begin to plan runs outside the required schedule or continue exercising even when no additional credit is available. From a behavioral record, both students appear equally active. From the perspective of long-term exercise, they are not in the same position.

Autonomous motivation is also more likely to survive changes in context. External regulation works well only while the external condition remains present. Grades, monitoring, and digital records can keep participation visible, but they lose their effect when students leave the course or graduate. Motivation that has become more self-directed is less dependent on these conditions. The student has begun to exercise for reasons that remain meaningful outside the campus running system.

The development of autonomous motivation should therefore be understood as a gradual reorganization of reasons for exercise. External requirements may remain in place, but their relative importance becomes weaker. Personal value, competence, choice, and positive exercise experience begin to carry more weight. When this change occurs, campus running is no longer only a way to produce temporary participation. It begins to provide the motivational basis for exercise that can continue without constant institutional control.

4.3 From Running Participation to Exercise Habit

Autonomous motivation creates a stronger basis

for continued exercise, but motivation alone does not yet constitute a habit. The final transition requires exercise to become part of a relatively stable pattern of daily life. Students need to move beyond responding to a scheduled campus running task and begin to organize physical activity with less reliance on reminders, assessment, or institutional supervision.

Repeated participation can support this process because it makes exercise more familiar. Students gradually learn when running fits into their schedule, how much effort they can tolerate, and how their bodies respond to different distances or intensities. These practical experiences matter. A student who has exercised regularly for several months usually has a clearer sense of when to slow down, when to rest, and what type of activity feels manageable. Exercise becomes easier to arrange because fewer decisions need to be made from the beginning each time.

Habit formation, however, should not be reduced to the repetition of the same running route. Campus running is only one possible entry point into regular physical activity. Some students may continue running after the formal requirement ends, while others may prefer cycling, strength training, badminton, basketball, or other forms of exercise. If the student begins to maintain physical activity independently, a change of exercise type does not mean that the original intervention has failed. It may instead indicate that exercise has become more closely connected with personal preference.

This point is important because a narrow understanding of habit can keep students dependent on the campus running system itself. If success is defined only as continuing to run a prescribed distance, the broader purpose of university physical education is easily lost. A more meaningful outcome is that students learn to regulate their own activity and continue exercising when there is no longer a compulsory mileage target.

The stability of exercise also depends on how well it can be integrated into ordinary routines. University life is not consistent. Academic workload changes, examinations interrupt schedules, and students may not always have access to the same facilities or running routes. A habit that depends on one fixed time and one fixed form of exercise can be fragile. More sustainable exercise behavior allows some adjustment. Students may run less during a busy

week, choose a shorter session, or replace running with another activity rather than abandoning exercise altogether.

There is also a difference between simply repeating an activity and beginning to identify oneself as someone who exercises regularly. This change is subtle, but it can affect persistence. Once exercise is understood as a normal part of personal life rather than a temporary university task, missing one session is less likely to end the entire routine. The student returns to exercise because the behavior still fits an accepted personal goal.

For this reason, the transition from campus running participation to exercise habit is not a straight line. Students may move between externally supported participation and more independent exercise for some time. Motivation can weaken, routines can be interrupted, and exercise preferences can change. What matters is whether the general pattern becomes less dependent on institutional pressure and more capable of surviving these changes.

At this stage, campus running has served its wider purpose. It has provided the initial repetition, but the student no longer needs the original system to maintain every exercise session. The activity has moved from a required behavior toward a self-managed pattern of physical activity. That shift marks the practical completion of the motivational transformation discussed in this section.

5. Why Motivational Transformation May Fail

The movement from required participation to autonomous exercise is possible, but it is far from automatic. Campus running can create repeated opportunities for physical activity, yet the same organizational structure that brings students into exercise may also keep their attention fixed on external requirements. When this happens, students become familiar with completing running tasks without necessarily developing a stronger personal reason to remain active.

A common difficulty lies in the strong emphasis on measurable outcomes. Distance, frequency, pace, and valid check-ins are convenient indicators because they make participation visible and relatively easy to assess. They also give students a clear target. Problems arise when these indicators become the main meaning of the activity. Students may begin each run by thinking about how many kilometers remain, whether the record will be accepted by the application, or

how many sessions are still needed. The exercise itself then receives less attention than the successful completion of the record.

The campus running arrangement at the Karamay Campus of China University of Petroleum (Beijing) illustrates how extensive such measurement can become. In its 2025–2026 autumn semester program, campus running was conducted through the BuDaoLePao application and included requirements concerning weekly participation, distance, pace, and cadence. Effective semester mileage was used to calculate the running score, which was then incorporated into physical education or comprehensive assessment. The scheme set minimum effective mileage at 130 km for male students and 110 km for female students, with additional mileage contributing to a higher running score. This kind of system has a clear organizational advantage: participation can be recorded and exercise volume can be maintained. Yet it also shows the tension between quantifying physical activity and encouraging students to exercise for reasons that extend beyond the score.

The issue is not that mileage targets are inherently harmful to motivation. For inactive students, a concrete target may be useful. It becomes less helpful when students have little opportunity to move beyond it. If progress is understood mainly as accumulating valid kilometers, students may learn how to satisfy the requirement without learning how to judge an appropriate exercise load, adjust a session according to their physical condition, or choose an activity they are willing to continue. A student can become highly efficient at completing campus running while remaining dependent on the campus running system.

Negative exercise experiences can make this problem more pronounced. Students enter university with very different levels of fitness and previous sport experience. The same distance may feel moderate to one student and exhausting to another. When an externally prescribed task repeatedly produces discomfort, frustration, or a sense of poor performance, it is difficult for exercise value to become personally meaningful. Running may instead become associated with avoidance. In such cases, increasing the required number of sessions can produce more running without producing more willingness to run.

Digital monitoring introduces another tension. Running applications can provide useful

feedback on distance, pace, frequency, and progress. These data can help students understand their activity and notice improvement. But digital records may also shift attention toward whether a session is recognized as “valid.” A run that is physically meaningful but fails to meet a technical requirement can be treated as if it did not occur. When students repeatedly experience exercise through this logic, the distinction between being physically active and completing an officially recognized task becomes blurred.

There is also a problem when campus running remains disconnected from other forms of physical activity. Not every student will eventually enjoy running, and the formation of an exercise habit should not require this. A student may discover through regular campus running that exercise improves mood or physical fitness, yet prefer badminton, cycling, strength training, or basketball as a long-term activity. If the program leaves little space for this movement toward personal preference, the motivation developed during campus running may have nowhere to go once the requirement ends.

Motivational transformation therefore tends to fail when external regulation remains the dominant reason for participation throughout the entire process. Students may complete a large amount of exercise under such conditions, but the behavior remains tied to grades, mileage, applications, and institutional schedules. The difficulty is not getting students to run for one semester. It is allowing the reasons for running to change while they are doing it. Without that change, campus running may produce temporary compliance rather than a durable basis for independent exercise.

6. Pathways from Campus Running to Sustainable Exercise Habits

6.1 Creating Positive and Achievable Exercise Experiences

If campus running is expected to contribute to long-term exercise habits, the experience of running itself has to be taken seriously. Students are unlikely to develop a stable willingness to exercise when most sessions are remembered as tiring, stressful, or difficult to complete. External requirements may keep participation going for a time, but they cannot fully compensate for a consistently negative exercise experience. A more sustainable transition begins when students feel that the activity is manageable and that

improvement is possible.

This is particularly important because university students differ greatly in physical fitness, running experience, body condition, and previous exposure to sport. A fixed distance or pace may be easy for students who already exercise regularly, while the same requirement can be demanding for those with low endurance. Treating these students as if they begin from the same physical level may produce very different motivational outcomes. Some students experience progress. Others repeatedly experience failure.

An achievable exercise target does not mean making campus running too easy. The aim is to keep the challenge within a range that allows students to complete the activity with reasonable effort and to notice changes over time. Small improvements can be meaningful. Running the same distance with fewer breaks, recovering more quickly, controlling breathing more effectively, or maintaining a comfortable pace for longer can all provide evidence of progress. These changes may appear minor from the perspective of performance training, but for students with limited exercise experience they can shape whether running is regarded as something they are capable of continuing.

For this reason, progress should not be understood only through accumulated distance or faster pace. Such measures are useful, but they capture only part of the exercise experience. A student who learns to regulate pace and finishes a run without excessive fatigue may have made meaningful progress even if the recorded time has changed little. Another student may gradually become more willing to exercise after discovering that a moderate run helps reduce mental fatigue. These experiences matter because they connect exercise with outcomes that students can actually feel.

The design of campus running can support this process by allowing more realistic progression. Students with weak fitness may begin with shorter or lower-intensity sessions and gradually increase the exercise load. Those with stronger physical capacity can be given more challenging goals without turning these standards into universal requirements. A differentiated approach makes it easier for students to compare their current performance with their own previous condition rather than constantly comparing themselves with stronger runners.

Feedback also has a role here. Digital running platforms already provide large amounts of information, but more data do not necessarily create a better exercise experience. Distance, pace, and frequency are most useful when students can understand what those numbers mean for their own exercise. Feedback that shows gradual improvement or helps students adjust intensity may strengthen perceived competence. In contrast, feedback that functions mainly as proof of completion may do little to help students understand their physical development.

Positive exercise experience also involves emotional response. Running does not need to be enjoyable every time, and it would be unrealistic to expect students to feel pleasure during every session. What matters is that exercise is not repeatedly associated with punishment or failure. Comfortable routes, reasonable scheduling, opportunities to run with others, and enough recovery between sessions can all change how students experience the activity. Over time, running may become less of an imposed interruption and more of a familiar part of daily life.

There is a practical reason to emphasize this point. Students are more likely to continue an activity when they believe they can manage it. Perceived competence grows through repeated successful experience, not through abstract encouragement. A student who has learned how to complete a moderate run without excessive discomfort is in a stronger position to exercise independently than one who has only learned how to meet the minimum requirement under pressure.

Creating positive and achievable exercise experiences therefore means changing the question from “Did the student finish the required run?” to “What did the student learn from repeated participation?” If campus running helps students understand their own fitness, recognize improvement, and gain confidence in managing physical effort, the activity begins to support a more durable form of motivation. This provides the basis for the next step: giving students greater control over how they participate in exercise.

6.2 Increasing Autonomy in Exercise Participation

A positive exercise experience is more likely to develop into a lasting habit when students also have some control over how they participate. Campus running usually needs a basic

organizational framework, especially when it forms part of university physical education. Yet there is a difference between providing structure and determining almost every detail of exercise. When distance, pace, time, route, and frequency are all fixed, students may become good at following the system without learning how to organize physical activity for themselves.

Autonomy does not require the removal of exercise requirements. For students who have been physically inactive for a long time, some external structure may still be necessary. The more practical issue is whether that structure leaves room for decision-making. A student might be required to maintain regular physical activity while still being allowed to choose a suitable running time, adjust pace according to fitness, or distribute exercise sessions across the week. These choices are small, but they give students experience in regulating their own activity. This ability becomes important when institutional supervision is no longer present.

The degree of autonomy can also change as students gain exercise experience. At the beginning, relatively clear guidance may help students establish a routine. Later, the same level of control may no longer be necessary. Students who already understand their own running pace and physical condition can be given more flexibility in setting distance or weekly goals. In this sense, autonomy can be introduced gradually rather than treated as an all-or-nothing condition. Campus running then becomes less about keeping students inside a fixed system and more about preparing them to manage exercise outside it.

Some university practices already show room for this kind of flexibility. In the 2026 graduate physical education arrangements at Harbin Institute of Technology, students could complete the campus running requirement through either a specified total distance with a minimum number of runs or a required number of running check-ins. Participation in university or school-level sports competitions and physical activities could also be used to reduce part of the campus running requirement. Such arrangements still maintain a clear exercise requirement, but they do not define physical activity entirely through one identical pattern of running. They leave some space for students who participate in other forms of sport to have that participation recognized.

This kind of flexibility matters because students

do not develop an attachment to exercise in the same way. Some may gradually enjoy running itself. Others may become more willing to exercise but prefer basketball, swimming, badminton, strength training, or another activity. If campus running is treated as the only acceptable form of exercise, the system may unintentionally restrict a motivational change that has already begun. A student can value physical activity without valuing running in particular.

Choice also helps students connect exercise with personal goals. A student concerned with endurance may choose a longer, steady run, while another may be more interested in maintaining general physical activity during a demanding academic week. Allowing some adjustment makes it possible to respond to these differences. This does not mean that every preference should determine the program. Basic safety, exercise volume, and educational objectives still need to be protected. The point is that students should gradually learn to make reasonable exercise decisions within those boundaries.

There is also a practical learning process behind autonomy. Independent exercisers need to judge effort, recognize fatigue, arrange recovery, and modify plans when daily circumstances change. These skills cannot be developed if students only receive instructions about what counts as a valid run. A campus running program that gives students limited but meaningful choices can provide a setting in which such decisions are practiced. Mistakes may still occur. A student may choose an unrealistic pace or arrange sessions poorly at first. Learning to correct these decisions is itself part of becoming capable of exercising independently.

Greater autonomy may also change the meaning of responsibility. Under a highly controlled system, responsibility often means completing what has been assigned. Under a more autonomy-supportive system, students begin to take responsibility for maintaining their own physical activity. The distinction is subtle but important. In the first case, the institution carries most of the planning and the student carries out the task. In the second, the student gradually takes over part of that planning.

Campus running therefore needs some space for students to move from compliance toward self-regulation. The purpose is not simply to make the

program feel less compulsory. It is to let students practice the choices that regular exercise outside university will eventually require. Once students can decide how, when, and in what form to remain physically active, the transition toward independent exercise becomes much more realistic.

6.3 Extending Campus Running into Independent Exercise

The final value of campus running should not be measured by whether students continue to complete the same running task after the formal requirement ends. A more important outcome is whether they are able to remain physically active without relying on compulsory mileage, digital check-ins, or course assessment. In this sense, campus running is better understood as a starting point. It gives students repeated contact with exercise, but the long-term goal is to make that contact transferable to exercise outside the original system.

This transition requires more than continuing to run. Students need to develop some basic ability to organize exercise for themselves. They need to know how often they can exercise, what level of intensity is appropriate, when recovery is needed, and how physical activity can be fitted around study and daily routines. These decisions are usually made by the institution during campus running. Once that structure disappears, the student has to make them independently. If no such ability has been developed, exercise may stop even when the student already recognizes its value.

The form of physical activity also needs to become more flexible. Running is accessible and relatively easy to organize, which explains why it is widely used in university exercise programs. It is not, however, the preferred long-term activity for every student. Some may continue jogging, while others may be more willing to remain active through cycling, badminton, basketball, table tennis, strength training, or other forms of exercise. A sustainable exercise habit should therefore not be defined too narrowly as the continuation of running itself. What needs to remain stable is regular participation in physical activity.

The sunshine sports program at Quzhou University offers a useful example of how this broader approach can be incorporated into campus exercise. In the 2025–2026 academic year, its system included conventional running check-

ins as well as a “free running” mode that students could use outside the assessed running requirement. The university also allowed exercise to be recorded through sports wristbands, with activities including running, basketball, cycling, badminton, table tennis, and tennis. In the second semester, valid wristband participation was based on maintaining a specified heart-rate level for a given period rather than requiring all students to complete the same running activity.

This arrangement is still part of an organized university program, so it should not be treated as equivalent to fully independent exercise. What it shows, however, is that campus physical activity does not have to remain confined to one form of running. Recognition of different activities creates a possible bridge between structured participation and personal exercise preference. A student who does not develop an interest in running may still discover that badminton or cycling is easier to maintain. From the perspective of habit formation, this is not a loss of the original running outcome. It may be a more realistic form of long-term physical activity.

Such a transition also reduces the risk that students interpret exercise as something that exists only within the campus running system. If physical activity has always been defined by valid routes, required kilometers, and an application record, students may find it difficult to imagine exercise without these conditions. Independent exercise requires a different way of thinking. A run can still be worthwhile when it produces no course credit. A basketball game can count as meaningful physical activity even when it is not included in a formal assessment. This shift in understanding is small but important because it separates the value of exercise from the institutional record of exercise.

Personal preference becomes increasingly important at this stage. Exercise habits are more likely to survive when the activity fits the individual's interests, physical condition, available time, and social environment. A student may prefer running alone in the evening, while another may be more willing to exercise through a weekly badminton game with friends. The physiological form of the activity is different, but both can support regular physical activity if participation is sufficiently stable. Requiring all students to preserve the same exercise pattern after campus running would ignore these differences.

Students also need to learn how to respond when routines are interrupted. Independent exercise rarely follows a perfectly stable schedule. Examinations, internships, travel, illness, or changes in living arrangements can reduce available time. A habit becomes more durable when students can adjust rather than abandon it. A thirty-minute run may become a shorter session during a busy week. Outdoor running may be replaced temporarily by indoor exercise. The ability to make these changes is part of exercise self-management and is difficult to develop when participation has always depended on fixed institutional rules.

The relationship between campus running and independent exercise is therefore not one of simple continuation. The student does not have to reproduce the original program after leaving it. What should be carried forward is the capacity to remain active, to choose an appropriate form of exercise, and to return to exercise when routines are disrupted. Campus running has greater educational value when it prepares students for these decisions rather than making continued participation dependent on the same external structure.

This also changes what successful habit formation looks like. A student who no longer uses the campus running application but exercises three times a week through cycling and badminton may have achieved a more meaningful outcome than a student who completes every required run but stops once the semester ends. The first case reflects a transfer of motivation and exercise management into daily life. The second reflects successful short-term participation, but the behavior remains tied to the original requirement.

Extending campus running into independent exercise therefore means allowing the original activity to become less central over time. Running can initiate regular movement, provide early experiences of physical improvement, and help students discover the personal value of exercise. It does not need to remain the final form of that habit. The stronger outcome is that students leave campus running with enough motivation, confidence, and practical knowledge to continue physical activity in a form they are willing and able to sustain.

7. Conclusion

Campus running can increase the frequency of physical activity among university students, but

repeated participation does not by itself create a lasting exercise habit. The more important change takes place in motivation. Students may begin running because of course requirements, mileage targets, or assessment rules, yet continued exercise becomes more likely only when these external reasons are gradually replaced or supported by personally accepted ones.

The process is not linear. Some students may develop a stronger sense of competence and begin to value exercise after repeated participation, while others may continue to treat running mainly as a task. This difference helps explain why the same campus running system can produce very different long-term outcomes. High completion rates can show that students participated, but they do not necessarily show that students are ready to exercise independently.

For campus running to contribute to habit formation, it needs to provide more than repeated exposure to physical activity. Students should have opportunities to experience progress, make reasonable choices, understand their own physical condition, and connect exercise with goals that matter to them. The eventual form of exercise may also change. Continuing to be physically active through running, cycling, ball games, or other activities can be a more meaningful outcome than simply reproducing the original campus running task.

The long-term value of campus running therefore lies in whether students can continue to exercise when grades, check-ins, and compulsory mileage are no longer present. When participation becomes less dependent on external control and more closely tied to personal choice and daily routine, campus running has moved beyond short-term compliance and begun to support a sustainable exercise habit.

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