The Second Active Living Research Conference: Signs of Maturity

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This special issue highlights some of the papers presented at the second annual Active Living Research (ALR) Conference in February 2005. Each represents an important building block in developing a comprehensive knowledge base concerning environmental and policy influences on physical activity. In the summer of 2000 when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Board of Trustees approved the concept paper for what would become Active Living Research, none of us could have imagined how quickly this evidence base would emerge. The program staff of RWJF was charged with developing grantmaking strategies that would lead to better approaches to increase population physical activity levels. The 1996 Surgeon General’s report on physical activity had clearly demonstrated the health benefits of exercise, yet health educators, exercise physiologists, and others had shown limited impact in significantly increasing the number of people engaging in even moderate levels of physical activity.1 RWJF was eager to stimulate substantial improvements in a behavior that had such potential for improving the health of all Americans, as they had with smoking. Physical activity was determined to be an appropriate and worthy target.

Much has been written about using ecological models to promote health behavior change, and the benefits of targeting environmental and policy solutions to change population level behavior are generally accepted.2-7 However, few foundations have invested in developing and evaluating these types of interventions. RWJF has been unique in its understanding of environmental action strategies and its willingness to support policy research to inform those approaches. (See RWJF initiatives such as A Matter of Degree, Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions, Smokeless States and the Substance Abuse Policy Research Program, for example.) As the first step in creating a social change strategy designed to increase population physical activity levels, Active Living Research was funded to investigate which environments and what policies would have the greatest potential to impact physical activity. Initial studies focused on developing and validating measures of the built environment for use in establishing a systematic evidence base. Measurement studies were followed by correlational studies to help determine the relationships between the environment and physical activity levels. Some of the papers in this special issue report on these initial measurement and correlation studies.

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Since that initial RWJF trustee decision, significant momentum for understanding and creating health promoting environments has emerged. In the fall of 2003, both the American Journal of Public Health and the American Journal of Health Promotion published special issues focusing on the built environment and its impact on human health.\textsuperscript{8,9} That was followed by the first National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) meeting (May, 2004) focusing on Obesity and the Built Environment and the subsequent release of a call for research proposals to investigate the built environment’s impact on obesity. The US Task Force on Community Preventive Services has found enough evidence to include urban design and land use policies and practice as recommended strategies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s Community Guide.\textsuperscript{10} A 2005 Transportation Research Board and Institute of Medicine (TRB-IOM) report found evidence to support relationships among transportation, land use, and health and called for prospective studies to further examine the cause and effect of such connections.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, the IOM report on childhood obesity called for multi-level interventions that include improving the built environment and community design for children. Much attention has been given to the built environment since the summer of 2000.\textsuperscript{12} The number of researchers interested in the field has increased, new and diverse professional partnerships have developed, and exciting new public health practices are being implemented in communities across the country.

Interest in the ALR program and the annual conference is a small indication of how these issues have moved up in concern and stature. In 2004, we turned away so many potential conference attendees that we were forced to move the 2005 conference to a larger hotel. In 2004, we had 144 participants, increasing to 187 in 2005. In 2005, we had over 70 abstracts submitted for the conference and have seen a constant increase in interest from new applicants with each call for proposals. These are exciting times for those interested in environmental and policy approaches for promoting healthy behaviors.

All of the research conceived of and supported by ALR is designed to inform action and create change. ALR studies can inform how to intervene in neighborhoods and institutions with policies that create more health promoting environments for all. Many of the papers reported in this special issue target the fundamental issue of measurement. Creating and validating audit tools, ensuring reliability of instruments, creating protocols or standards for using technology, and providing empirically sound operational definitions are all part of the essential building blocks necessary to create a comprehensive evidence base that can be compared across studies to accumulate knowledge. Funding measurement development studies was the initial priority of ALR, and this issue contains some of the first reports about this new generation of measures of environments and physical activity within specific environments. These papers describe some of the fundamental tools necessary to create evidence to inform action. Ewing and colleagues took on the difficult task of operationalizing concepts used by urban designers to characterize built environments.\textsuperscript{13} The definitions they developed can be used to measure qualities of urban spaces and to teach urban design principles. Forsyth and team contribute guidelines for developing and documenting Geographic Information System (GIS) measures of the built environment that can be standardized across research teams.\textsuperscript{14} Saelens et al. report a systematic process for developing and evaluating a comprehensive observational measure of parks and playgrounds.\textsuperscript{15} Bedimo-Rung and her team