

Engaging Communities to Create Active Living Environments

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In 2010, the Active Living Research (ALR) conference theme was “Engaging Communities to Create Active Living Environments.” This theme was based on the idea that getting a sedentary nation moving is a job for all of us. Research can help empower communities, just as data from scientific studies gives empowered communities ammunition in policy debates. The conference program highlighted ways we can work with this many-faceted approach to achieving our goal of an active America.

What is a community? In the simplest terms, a community is a group of people with something in common. Every person in America is a member of the community of people which needs to be active, as being active is fundamental to healthy living. Of course we are each members of many other communities, with many other commonalities, goals, and missions. In the case of physical activity, our differences matter less than our common interest. We are lucky in this regard; seldom have researchers and activists tackled an issue with such universality. This means that whether we are talking to dog walkers or Libertarians, we can make basically the same pitch about the need to be active.

People are more likely to admit that they should be active than they are to actually be active. Here is where the many kinds of communities can help. Senior centers are one excellent example. The research is clear that even a modest amount of regular activity will improve seniors’ functioning and independence. Senior centers have a strong rationale for acting and a strong message to sell their clients. The many senior centers that have worked on this know that activity can be increased, with very positive results. If we multiply those successes by our closest allies in schools, park groups, neighborhood associations, and environmental groups, among others, we will begin to have the momentum we need to reach out to thousands of organizations that have a role to play. While department stores and banks might not think that active living is their job, we know from their enthusiastic support of sporting events that they can be brought into the movement for a more active America.

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At the same time, we must bear in mind that subgroups in America have a strong tendency to organize around negative thoughts about the “other,” ranging from distrust to active hatred. The growth of Islamophobia in recent years has been an example of this problematic tendency in American culture. While active living is of importance to all, different kinds of activity are associated, for better or for worse, with different subgroups. These identifications can become barriers to other groups to join in those kinds of activities. Indeed, to the extent that activities create a habitus—a body type—these kinds of “activity identities” can become as evident as skin color. The tall, thin frame and loping walk of basketball players can be read as clearly as the bulging biceps of those who lift weights. In the same way, the energy of the toned and tan young urban professional contrasts sharply with the slow pace and heavier body of the poorer city dweller. It is possible, in this visual landscape of difference, for specific types of active living to become the exclusive property of one or another group, physically, emotionally, and socially off-limits to others.

One in-group/out-group dichotomy that has attracted the attention of policy-makers, researchers, and moms and dads is that of boys vs. girls. Despite the strides made by Title IX,¹ high school sports are still largely the domain of boys. This has a lifelong influence on women’s activity levels. It is quite clear that girls and women face social obstacles to being out-of-doors, and these affect their ability to exercise in parks and other public spaces. The solution to this problem is not immediately obvious. Certainly, a publicly-active First Lady Michelle Obama is a great help, as she is an important role model for girls and women. But her contribution to women’s motivation to be active is not necessarily sufficient to overcome the obstacles to women’s use of public space.

A heritage of exclusion and denigration in the US, which is rooted in the very early history of European contact with Native Americans, lingers to complicate every aspect of present-day life. While this may, at first, seem irrelevant to Active Living Research, if the research is to help activate the nation, one issue we might need to tackle is the lingering and festering problem of inter-group hatred and oppression. Abraham Lincoln pointed out that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” In that regard, we are not likely to have an optimally healthy nation if we are divided into groups along lines of being active or not. Thus, interestingly enough, Active Living Research’s interest in engaging communities

brings us to some of the deepest and most troublesome issues in modern American life. Engaging communities to be active together may help them be together in other ways. Let's hope the research on improving active living environments and policies for all Americans, and the application of research in collaboration with engaged communities, can contribute to reducing at least some of the forms of inequity in America.

The 2010 Active Living Research Conference

Though no one expects children to solve the daunting problem of childhood obesity, the opening of the 2010 Active Living Research Annual Conference illustrated the power of youth to contribute to solutions and inspire adults to renewed commitment. The conference theme, "Engaging Communities to Create Active Living Environments," was vividly illustrated by 2 eighth graders from The Monarch School who reported on their efforts to improve the safety and functionality of pedestrian facilities around their school. With guidance from the WalkSanDiego pedestrian advocacy group and support from ALR staff, the Monarch students explored the school neighborhood, took photos of walking hazards, and created a slide show to present their recommendations to city traffic engineers. The students spent a semester on the project, so they were well prepared and confident in their presentations. They were unafraid to ask for improvements, and they expected their voices to be heard. What makes these students more remarkable is that The Monarch School is designed to meet the needs of homeless youth. To hear these young people, with all the disadvantages they have to overcome, be such effective spokespeople for active living was inspiring. What more could we as adults do with far greater resources?

Thus, the seventh ALR Annual Conference began with a concrete demonstration of how the process of engaging communities can create surprising movement toward research-based environmental changes. The other notable event on February 9, 2010, the first day of the Conference, was the public announcement of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign to overcome childhood obesity. This happy coincidence encouraged the attendees that our efforts to build evidence to help young people become more active had a powerful new ally who was determined to engage communities all over the country in a growing movement.

For those not familiar, ALR funds research on environments and policies that can support active living for children and families, contributing evidence to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) extensive efforts to reverse childhood obesity by 2015, with an explicit focus on population groups at high risk.² Early ALR Conferences were designed for researchers, but as the field has matured, the results presented at the Conference has become of more interest to policy makers,

advocates, and practitioners from various fields. About 20% of attendees at the 2010 Conference were non-researchers. The "Engaging Communities" theme could apply to both researchers developing collaborations with community members and to community groups engaging researchers in advocacy efforts. The powerful keynote by Angela Glover-Blackwell, CEO of PolicyLink, drew from her experience leading a research and advocacy organization and summarized lessons learned about effectively engaging members of disadvantaged communities. One invited panel shared examples of community engagement in advocacy and research, and Meg Cheever³ from that panel wrote a commentary for this journal supplement. Another invited panel addressed the subtheme of accelerating progress in childhood obesity prevention and presented bold ideas and national efforts to get Americans active. Margaret Walls⁴ summarized her presentation on the federally-authorized Outdoor Resources Research Group that engaged numerous communities and constituencies. A diverse array of workshops built research skills and connected researchers with policy makers and policy making processes. Abstracts from all research presented and slides from panels, workshops, and oral presentations are available online (<http://www.activelivingresearch.org/conference/2010>).

The third ALR "Translating Research to Policy Award" was presented during the conference. The award recognizes groups or individuals engaged in policy and/or advocacy work who used research in the process of policy or environmental changes related to youth physical activity, sedentary behavior, or obesity prevention. A commentary on the winning project is published in this supplement.⁵ We hope this model project encourages others to use their research to make lasting policy changes.

Each year we make the Conference an active one. An Instant Recess break was led by Dr. Toni Yancey and her special guest, 8-time boxing World Champion, Roy Jones, Jr., who established a child-focused foundation. A variety of late afternoon activity breaks were offered, including a hip hop dance lesson from the EVEOKE youth group. For the second year, every presenter received "active applause" or a standing ovation that benefits both presenters and the audience. We encourage others to adopt these ideas for making your meetings active and to create your own innovations.

Preview and Themes in This Supplement

Papers in this supplemental issue of the Journal of Physical Activity and Health were presented at the 2010 Active Living Research Conference. Based on blind reviews of abstracts, some of the highest-scoring abstracts were invited to submit manuscripts for this supplement and to undergo peer review. The papers published here cover a diverse array of strategies geared toward the promotion of physical activity, representing the perspectives of