

ACE-SUPPORTED RESEARCH: Does 3 WINS Fitness Provide the Wins It Promises?



→ What You Need to Know:

3 WINS Fitness is a free program in which university students at California State University – Northridge serve as volunteer leaders of physical-activity classes in underserved communities. This research evaluated focus group discussions to examine the program's value to the community, individual participants and the student-instructors. What they found was that the program indeed yielded wins for everyone involved.

Lisa S. Chaudhari, PhD,
Rachel Lang-Balde, PhD,
Joshua Carlos, MS, and
Steven Loy, PhD, with
Daniel J. Green

[3 WINS Fitness](#) is one of ACE's [Community Engagement](#) partners and is recognized as an innovative program for delivering great physical-activity experiences to populations and communities that may not otherwise have access to such programs and that have disproportionately high rates of physical inactivity and related preventable chronic disease.

The concept behind 3 WINS Fitness is simple. University students studying kinesiology volunteer to lead fitness classes every morning in parks throughout the surrounding area. Everyone is welcome, the program is free and participants may choose from three different classes designed to meet people where they are in their physical-activity journeys. Most 3 WINS Fitness participants are Latino, female, between 36 and 64 years old, have a high school diploma or less, and earn less than \$50,000 annually.

What makes 3 WINS Fitness unique is its creative approach to meeting the needs of not only community members, but

also university students, through a partnership among academia, local municipalities, nonprofit organizations and the business community.

According to the 3 WINS Fitness mission statement, the intent was to develop an “exercise program that would be free (accessible), sustainable (no external funding required for daily operations) and replicable.” The program is succeeding at empowering traditionally deconditioned populations to exercise more by making it fun and by making it about community. The program's wins focus on reducing health inequities, increasing community health and providing student professional development.

The 3 WINS are defined in their mission statement as:

- ▶ **Participant Health:** An opportunity for young and old, fit and less fit to improve their health and maximize their potential
- ▶ **Community Health:** An opportunity to expose the entire community to a healthier lifestyle and provide the

education and the programming to make changes in the health of their families and reduce the personal and economic burden of physical inactivity–related diseases

- ▶ **Student Professional Development:** An opportunity for students to apply their education, gain job-related experience and grow in leadership skills and self-empowerment

A vital step for programs like 3 WINS Fitness is to assess how effective they are in terms of meeting their stated objectives. Stating your objectives is one thing; proving you can meet them is another thing entirely.

With that in mind, a group of researchers, led by Lisa Chaudhari, PhD, an instructor in the Department of Health Sciences and one of the Health Equity Research and Education (HERE) Center directors at California State University – Northridge (CSUN), and Steven Loy, PhD, a professor in the Kinesiology Department at CSUN and the creator of 3 WINS Fitness, performed a qualitative analysis of the 3 WINS Fitness program and evaluated its value for the student-instructors, participants and the community.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Analysis

This study utilized qualitative research methods, which focus on the exploration of lived experiences, perspectives and behaviors gained through a systematic analysis of participants' narratives, rather than numerical data points. Qualitative analysis seeks to describe a topic more than measure it by gathering lived experiences, viewpoints and behaviors through interviews and focus groups, and then analyzing and uncovering themes in those conversations. By contrast, a quantitative analysis collects numerical values to measure

different variables, such as changes in study participants' body composition or one-repetition maximum over the course of an intervention.

The Study

Over the course of two months in 2021, researchers conducted nine focus groups with a total of 51 individuals. Four groups included program participants, three groups included student-instructors and two groups featured a combination of participants and instructors. The research sample was drawn from a 10-year period of program participants, beginning from when 3 WINS Fitness began in 2011.

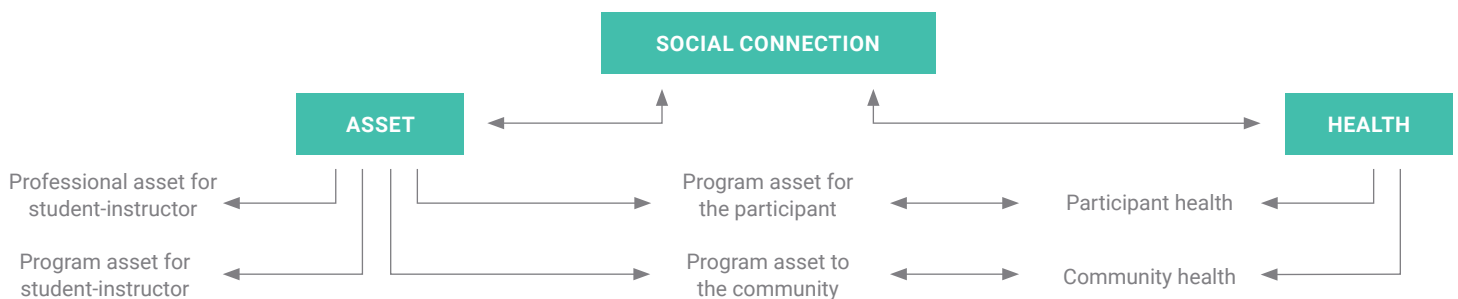
Given the program's growth from its initial location in the City of San Fernando to six locations in the community surrounding CSUN, the researchers were interested in evaluating the program from a holistic and long-term perspective by identifying consistently emerging themes that would help explain its sustainability and success. They also wanted to evaluate the program's scalability in terms of reaching out to communities with a preventive health-enhancing program.

The focus group sessions, each of which lasted 90 minutes, focused on three areas of discussion: participant health, community health and program significance to the student-instructors.

The Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group sessions: asset, health and social connection (Figure 1). Three additional themes that were identified—challenges, organizational structure and partnerships—will be addressed by the researchers in future publications.

Figure 1. Major Themes and Subthemes



Asset

The asset theme, which was defined as “perceived value or benefit,” was comprised of four subthemes, as you can see in Figure 1:

- ▶ **Professional asset for the student-instructor:** This included aptitude and interpersonal skills that led to tangible outcomes, including job and networking opportunities, in addition to less tangible benefits such as pride in the program and mentorship opportunities that may have been missing in their academic setting.
- ▶ **Program asset for the student-instructor:** This included the personal relationships that developed among instructors and with individual participants. In addition, the student-instructors spoke of having developed a greater understanding of the importance of exercise in their own lives, as well as in the lives of community participants.
- ▶ **Program asset for the community:** Both student-instructors and participants agreed that the program benefited the community, with some participants saying that their participation inspired family members to become more active.
- ▶ **Program asset for the participant:** In addition to reaching their physical-activity goals, participants said they felt cared for physically, emotionally and psychologically, and really valued the relationships they built with the student-instructors and their fellow participants.

Health

The health theme included two subthemes (see Figure 1):

- ▶ **Community health:** Participants and student-instructors spoke of the community-wide benefits of a physical-activity program that bridged existing gaps in nutrition, exercise and medical care. Some participants highlighted the positive impact on the generational health of the community, while others mentioned being better able to read and interpret food labels and feeling more comfortable speaking with their doctors.
- ▶ **Personal health:** Positive health outcomes included increased mobility, reduced blood sugar levels, weight loss, lowered blood pressure and improved mental health support.

Social Connection

Social connection manifested in several ways. Student-instructors reported feeling a strong sense of community and support among their fellow instructors as well as from their program participants. Likewise, program participants reported feeling like they were part of a larger community in a way that

crossed generations. The group fitness format enhanced feelings of camaraderie across the board, as participants felt supported during times of struggle and celebrated when successful.

The Bottom Line

As the researchers explain in the Discussion section of their research, “For a free program run by volunteers to be successful, all who are involved must receive benefit, despite being free, or the program will not thrive.” The analysis of the study groups conducted as part of this qualitative research demonstrates that 3 WINS Fitness certainly meets this requirement.

When speaking of the student-instructors, Dr. Chaudhari says, “they come out stronger” in terms of being able to leverage the relationships and networks created during their time in the 3 WINS program. In addition, Dr. Loy cites the communication skills they were able to develop while working in the community, as well as the confidence to talk about their experiences in a way that has been a differentiator for many of them as they moved further into their academic career or transitioned into the working world. “The voice of experience is much more convincing than an idea read from a book or heard in a lecture,” explains Dr. Loy, “and provides evidence that they are a doer, not just a talker.”

Dr. Loy believes that programs like this provide an opportunity for exercise professionals to develop the “soft skills” needed to connect with people. “We underestimate the practice it takes to truly communicate with people and develop the empathy required to make meaningful connections with people,” he says.

He goes on to explain that the fitness industry is not reaching roughly 75% of the population, and a large proportion of that number likely can’t afford these resources or don’t know how to find the appropriate resources.

So, how can we reach them on a large scale?

The fitness industry—and the health coaches and exercise professionals like you who are working within it—must find a way to expand its reach, and programs like 3 WINS Fitness offer a great opportunity to do just that. Dr. Loy suggests his students, as they move on into their careers, set aside a portion of their time to offer something pro bono to their community and continue to implement the valuable lessons learned in college and add on new experiences. While this work provides value in and of itself, Dr. Loy points out that this demonstrated compassion often serves people well when they’re interviewing for jobs or trying to progress in their careers.

Dr. Chaudhari says that for many student-instructors, the 3 WINS Fitness experience drives them to want to give back even after they leave the program, “because they realize how much of a difference it actually makes to these communities.” This kind of work goes a long way in “addressing these inequities in accessing these resources.”

Bridging the Gap Between the Fitness Industry and Public Health

The public health world is fully on board in acknowledging the importance of physical activity in terms of population health.

However, while public health can create policy and the fitness world can create effective programming, there is not enough financial support to incentivize professionals to work more extensively in these areas. In other words, the government, whether on a federal or local level, may acknowledge that we need to create more physically active communities and that exercise professionals have the right skill set to do that. However, they are not yet providing enough funding for people to make a living doing this community work. The potential healthcare-related cost savings must be recognized by engaging underserved populations and making people healthier in a way that makes fiscal sense. “We haven’t crossed that bridge yet,” says

Dr. Loy, “but we’re trying to make those connections.”

“ACE’s partnership with 3 WINS Fitness supports our commitment to bring equity to the health and fitness landscape and enhance the diversity of populations that have access to safe and effective physical-activity experiences,” explains ACE President and Chief Science Officer Cedric X. Bryant, PhD. “By expanding access to healthy physical-activity experiences

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in the communities that need it most, while also providing future health and fitness leaders with the education, training and certification they need to build their careers, we’re helping to improve individual, community and overall public health outcomes.”

Dr. Chaudhari wholeheartedly agrees that the collaboration is vital. One important consideration that should not be overlooked, she says, “is assessing what the community needs, from the community, at the beginning. You need to identify what you need in order to acquire that buy-in from a particular community.”

She goes on to explain: “It’s really about engaging multiple sectors, different types of community partners, and looking at improving those social determinants of health to improve physical-activity levels.” Clearly, it takes the right collaborative partners, including local universities, local government officials, parks and recreation departments, church leaders and exercise professionals, to make a large-scale, community-level program create wins for everyone involved, most importantly the program participants.

The results of this research should serve as a call to action to everyone from public health policymakers to individual exercise professionals and health coaches. We have a model that works, is free to the public, has proven benefits to both the participants and instructors, and is a scalable, replicable and cost-effective program. So, it’s time to get involved and help more people enjoy the benefits of a more active lifestyle. ▲

This ACE-supported research study was previously published in the peer-reviewed [Journal of Physical Activity and Health](#)