

# Exploring the development of outdoor sports among college students in western region universities

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**Abstract:** Since the 1980s, China has been developing outdoor sports, which have become increasingly popular and widespread, attracting a growing number of college students. In the western region, outdoor sports among college students are still in the early stages of development. A lack of understanding of outdoor sports among students, coupled with insufficient teaching staff and inadequate hardware facilities, are constraining the development of outdoor sports in universities in this region. This paper proposes that to enhance the development of outdoor sports in the western region, universities should increase the number of outdoor sports courses, strengthen the training of teaching staff, and improve team and facility construction.

**Keywords:** College students, Outdoor sports, Current situation, Outlook

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, outdoor sports have been introduced to China from Western countries. Initially, these activities were limited to small or specialized groups but gradually became more popular and widespread, attracting a large number of young college students. This trend is primarily due to the fact that young college students have a strong interest in new things and are more open to new concepts and ideas reflected in these novel sports. [1] When participating in outdoor sports, college students can relax, challenge themselves, and contribute to the development of these activities. Since 2003, China has placed emphasis on outdoor sports education, incorporating it into the physical education curriculum of general higher education institutions. By 2007, courses related to outdoor sports had been fully implemented in colleges and universities.

## 2. Types of outdoor sports among college students

In 2002, the Ministry of Education of China issued the Guidelines for Physical Education Curriculum in General Higher Education Institutions. The guidelines state that natural resources such as air, sunlight, water, rivers, lakes, seas, beaches, fields, forests, mountains, grasslands, snowfields, and deserts should be fully utilized to conduct teaching and training in wilderness survival and living skills, thereby developing natural environmental resources [2]. Universities have carried out in-depth reforms of physical education courses, and the emergence of outdoor sports in higher education institutions reflects the emphasis on educational functions. Outdoor sports refer to a group of physical activities conducted in natural environments. The outdoor sports course is a component of the physical education curriculum for college students. It involves utilizing natural environments and focuses on the basic knowledge, techniques, and skills shared by various outdoor sports as the main teaching content. The teaching objective is to cultivate students' physical fitness, psychological qualities, and adaptability required for participation in outdoor sports and related competitions. This is achieved through the implementation of teaching plans and organizational processes [3].

During their free time, people engage in activities such as hiking, cycling, skiing, and mountaineering in mountainous areas, deserts, water regions, and plateaus to exercise, relieve stress, expand social networks, or satisfy adventurous and thrill-seeking desires, thereby enhancing their outdoor sports experiences. The National Sports Bureau conducted a survey and summary of the outdoor sports activities participated in by

college students in 2015, categorizing the main types of outdoor sports in universities into five major groups.

### **2.1. Mountain projects**

These mainly include jungle, canyon, rock face, and other related activities.

### **2.2. Island projects**

These primarily consist of desert island survival, tidal flat projects, cliff projects, circumnavigation projects, and diving activities.

### **2.3. Plateau projects**

These mainly refer to mountaineering and adventure activities (such as glacier and snowfield projects).

### **2.4. Desert projects**

These primarily include desert, wilderness, and wetland activities.

### **2.5. Artificial structure projects**

These mainly involve climbing buildings, climbing towers, and highway traversal activities.

Through surveys on the frequency of participation in outdoor sports activities among college students in the western region, the most popular activities in descending order are: day-hiking, mountaineering, camping, trekking, rock climbing, off-road cycling, canyoning, skiing, and cave exploration. Overall, college students tend to prefer activities that require low technical skills, minimal equipment, and are less challenging. In contrast, outdoor sports that demand high levels of technical expertise and specialized equipment are less appealing to students [4]. This is mainly due to the insufficient number of outdoor sports instructors in universities, limited course offerings, and a lack of necessary equipment.

## **3. Current status of outdoor sports participation among college students in western universities**

At this stage, the towering skyscrapers of reinforced concrete often block our view, hiding the stars and the moon, and blinding our innocent hearts. Amidst the hustle and bustle of city life, many people are seeking ways to relax—drifting in the lively rivers, shouting on the cliffs, or wandering through the deep forests, pursuing and enjoying a kind of pleasure...Given the current lifestyle and living environment, the development of outdoor sports among college students needs to be intensified. The investigation of its current status was mainly conducted through a questionnaire survey among students at our university. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, with 192 returned, yielding an effective response rate of 96%. The survey results show that 48% of college students obtain information about outdoor sports from friends or classmates, while 29% get it from mass media. This indicates that the spread of outdoor sports among young people is very rapid, and media dissemination has facilitated college students' further understanding of outdoor sports. A total of 83.6% of college students have participated in outdoor sports in various forms, though not regularly. With the increasing popularity of outdoor sports, more college students will be attracted to participate.

### **3.1. Motivations for college students' participation in outdoor sports**

The motivations for college students to participate in outdoor sports are, in order: to build willpower, reconnect with nature, cultivate sentiment, challenge themselves, enhance social skills, and exercise their bodies. Most college students are only children, living relatively comfortable lives with limited exposure to setbacks. This often results in a lack of resilience, leading many to seek character-building experiences through outdoor sports. Additionally, most students lack a sense of teamwork and have limited social adaptability and communication skills due to minimal participation in social activities. Outdoor sports provide an opportunity for students to support and collaborate with each other, fostering friendships and improving their social skills. Engaging in outdoor activities also helps students to relax, learn to regulate their emotions, and achieve a more balanced state of mind.

### **3.2. Forms of organization for college students' participation in outdoor sports**

The forms of participation in outdoor sports among college students are diverse. The most popular form is "participating with classmates or friends." This method is relatively free and informal, allowing students to be more lively and spontaneous while keeping costs low. It helps relieve stress and is well-liked by students. However, it often lacks sufficient safety guarantees. The second most common form is "participating in social group activities." However, students' organizational abilities are generally limited, and their activity plans may not be thorough. Additionally, there is often a lack of technical guidance during these activities [5]. The third most common form is "self-organized activities," which reflects many college students' desire to challenge themselves and conquer their own limits. However, these activities come with higher safety risks and usually involve a smaller number of participants. Other important forms of participation include "social clubs" and "university courses."

### **3.3. Types of outdoor sports participated in by college students**

Among the outdoor sports activities participated in by college students, day-hiking ranks first, followed by mountain biking and trekking. Currently, almost all universities in the western region have cycling clubs, and cycling is quite popular on campus. In recent years, outdoor adventure training has gained widespread popularity among students, enhancing participants' team awareness through specific activities. For example, orienteering is highly favored by college students. During the winter season, skiing is particularly popular. Activities such as mountaineering and desert exploration, which require higher levels of professional knowledge and specialized equipment, have relatively fewer participants.

### **3.4. Consumption patterns of college students in outdoor sports**

The outdoor activities most commonly participated in by college students are day-hiking and trekking, which generally incur low costs, usually less than 100 yuan. The expenditure is often directly proportional to the time spent on outdoor activities. If the activities take place locally, the costs are relatively low. However, if they are conducted in another location, the expenses will increase accordingly.

## **4. Challenges in outdoor sports participation among western region college students**

Outdoor sports in universities in the western region have aligned with the development of the times and responded to the national call for educational reform in physical education. The development of outdoor sports should be tailored to local geographical features, grounded in sports education, and focus on leveraging the fundamental functions of outdoor sports in promoting physical health and providing mental relaxation.

### **4.1. Awareness of outdoor sports among college students in western region universities**

The survey results indicate that 77% of students have some understanding of outdoor sports, while 16% have limited knowledge. This suggests that there are still challenges in promoting outdoor sports in universities in the western region, highlighting the need for university leaders to pay more attention to this issue.

### **4.2. Outdoor sports course offerings in western region universities**

Only 33% of universities in the western region offer outdoor sports courses, which is clearly insufficient to meet student demand. With societal development and improved family economic conditions, students' demand for sports activities has increased. Outdoor sports are seen as novel, relaxing, and fashionable, making them popular among students [6]. However, the current course offerings are limited, primarily consisting of off-road practice or wilderness survival as elective courses. These courses are not only singular in content and format but also short in duration. Most institutions cease offering physical education courses after the second year, making it difficult for students to gain a systematic understanding of outdoor sports through school courses. This limitation restricts students' participation in outdoor sports and is not conducive to fostering their enthusiasm for these activities.

#### **4.3. Participation in outdoor sports clubs in western region universities**

College student clubs are also an important avenue for promoting outdoor sports. After joining these clubs, students enhance their understanding of outdoor sports through various activities, gaining more knowledge related to these sports. This broadens their horizons and increases their interest in outdoor activities. The enthusiasm among college students for establishing outdoor sports clubs is very high. However, compared to other sports, outdoor sports have a higher risk factor and greater safety concerns, making the approval process for these clubs challenging [7].

The main outdoor sports clubs in universities are cycling clubs, roller skating clubs, and tourism clubs. Most of these clubs were established after 2003. This was primarily due to the approval in July 2002 of the project titled "Expanding University Sports Topics and Promoting Students' Physical and Mental Development—Experimental Research on Wilderness Survival and Living Training in Universities." This initiative encouraged universities to support outdoor sports activities among students, demonstrating the close relationship between the development of outdoor sports in universities and national policies.

#### **4.4. Hardware facilities for outdoor sports in western region universities**

The survey indicates that only 4% of college students are satisfied with the current outdoor sports facilities in universities, while a significant number of students (14%) express strong dissatisfaction. Most students feel that the existing facilities on campus are insufficient to meet their needs. Many students have to purchase their own equipment, which further limits their participation in outdoor sports. There is a clear need for universities to invest more in sports facility construction to better support students' demand for outdoor activities.

### **5. Strategies for developing outdoor sports in western region universities**

As outdoor sports continue to develop, people's understanding of them has deepened. Characterized by their unique natural, exploratory, and challenging qualities, outdoor sports have been rapidly embraced by the public and have become an important way for people to engage in physical activities, travel, and adventure. To promote the development of outdoor sports in universities, it is necessary to increase the number of outdoor sports courses, enhance the quality of teaching staff, improve teaching facilities and venues, strengthen team building, and amplify publicity efforts and the service system for outdoor sports.

#### **5.1. Increase the offering of outdoor sports courses**

The Guidelines for Physical Education Curriculum in General Higher Education Institutions issued by the Ministry of Education of China state that extracurricular physical exercise should be systematically and purposefully integrated into the curriculum to form a combined in-class and out-of-class physical education system. Universities should respond to the national call for college students' participation in outdoor sports and increase the proportion of outdoor sports courses in the overall curriculum. At present, the outdoor sports courses offered in universities in the western region mainly focus on rock climbing and orienteering, with fewer courses on other sports. Universities need to quickly provide students with professional guidance, strengthen theoretical teaching on outdoor sports, and equip students with correct knowledge to avoid unnecessary dangers in outdoor activities.

#### **5.2. Professional skills training for teachers**

Universities in the western region generally face a shortage of teaching staff, while the development of outdoor sports requires professional technical guidance. Therefore, universities in the western region should strengthen the allocation of teaching staff, improve the structure of the teaching team, and enhance the influence of outdoor sports instructors to promote the development of outdoor sports in universities. Currently, few institutions in China offer specialized outdoor sports programs, and many teachers lack professional training in outdoor sports, resulting in insufficient teaching capabilities. To address this, universities in the western region should send outdoor sports instructors to specialized training institutions outside the campus to learn the latest professional skills in outdoor sports and enhance their teaching abilities. Additionally, universities should strengthen inter-institutional exchanges to gradually improve teaching capabilities and promote the development of local outdoor sports

### **5.3. Strengthening campus club and association development**

College students primarily participate in outdoor sports through campus clubs and associations, with participation numbers showing a gradual increase. Universities in the western region need to place greater emphasis on the development of outdoor sports clubs and associations. A well-organized outdoor sports environment can attract more students to participate. In club activities, in addition to practical exercises, regular lectures on outdoor sports knowledge should be conducted to help students understand the basic theories of outdoor sports and master practical skills. For example, in orienteering, students need to learn direction identification, camping, and survival skills, as well as become proficient in the use of rock climbing equipment and participate in adventure training programs. These efforts provide students with a comprehensive understanding of outdoor sports, laying a solid foundation for their smooth implementation. Universities in the western region should also leverage their unique advantages to encourage students to participate in more outdoor sports competitions, promoting the healthy development of outdoor sports on campus. Additionally, enhancing inter-university exchanges and cooperation is essential. By using competitions to drive learning and vice versa, students gain opportunities to engage in practical activities within outdoor organizations, thereby improving their social interaction and adaptability skills.

### **5.4. Improving the campus environment for outdoor sports**

Many college students are addicted to the internet and blindly pursue material pleasures, which negatively impacts their physical and mental health and affects their psychology. To change this unhealthy lifestyle among students, it is necessary to alter their daily habits. Outdoor sports, as a form of positive and exploratory physical activity, can play an active role in students' learning and create an atmosphere that encourages participation in these activities, thereby improving students' daily behavior. Schools should require outdoor sports courses to be arranged for all grades and integrated with other courses to ensure the continuity of students' learning in this area. Participation in outdoor sports can enhance students' self-confidence, team spirit, and sense of cooperation.

### **5.5. Increase investment in outdoor equipment**

Universities in the western region need to increase funding for outdoor sports equipment and continuously improve facilities to support the development of outdoor sports on campus. By alleviating students' concerns about equipment costs, these measures can promote the popularization of outdoor sports and enhance college students' participation levels. Universities can attract sponsorships from social enterprises through outdoor sports clubs, securing additional funds for venue and equipment construction while also promoting corporate culture, achieving a win-win outcome.

### **5.6. Establishing a rational outdoor sports service system for college students**

A rational outdoor sports service system is essential for the smooth development of outdoor activities among college students. The main concept is that outdoor sports not only encompass various physical activities but also require research on the theory of outdoor sports, organization of knowledge lectures, and appreciation of outdoor sports competitions. A well-structured service system can expand students' knowledge, enhance their participation in outdoor sports, and reduce the risks associated with these activities.

Drawing on the experience of outdoor sports service systems abroad, the construction of such a system in Chinese universities primarily focuses on five aspects: organizational management, support and assurance, systematic evaluation and analysis, and research and innovation.

## **6. Conclusion**

In recent years, outdoor sports in universities of the western region have seen rapid development. However, there are still deficiencies in course offerings, teaching staff, and equipment provision for college students' outdoor sports, which constrain the development of these activities. Universities in the western region should place greater emphasis on the design and development of outdoor sports training courses. These courses can achieve the five goals required by the physical education curriculum of general higher education institutions: participation in sports, sports skills, physical health, mental health, and social

adaptation. They can also better promote the quality of college students and enhance the teaching quality of universities.

The development of outdoor sports in universities of the western region requires efficient integration of resources, strengthening of infrastructure construction, creation of a positive atmosphere for outdoor sports, and improvement of the service system for these activities. By continuously meeting the needs of college students for outdoor sports and fully leveraging the value and functions of these activities, universities can promote the physical and mental health and overall development of students, and attract more students to participate in outdoor sports.

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