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Students Bond with Fitness Programs

By Jill E. Steinman, CONTRIBUTING WRITER
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In her freshman year, Angie Peng '14 could barely run a mile. Whenever she attempted to go for a long jog, she said, she would stop whenever she got too tired. But joining Harvard On The Move, a University-wide program that encourages group exercise, helped change that. Earlier this year, with three years of HOTM participation under her belt, Peng was able to complete her first marathon.

“The only reason I have been able to [run] is because there have been people running with me who distract me from how far I have run or how tired I am,” Peng said. “It is very hard to become a distance runner on your own.”

Like Peng, many Harvard community members said that staying fit and living a healthy lifestyle is no easy feat. With several commitments and activities to juggle, students said, exercise often falls low the list of priorities.

“Harvard is a brand new environment, and there are a lot of other appealing extracurriculars that compete for one's time here,” said Craig Rodgers, who founded the Harvard College Marathon Challenge in 2005. “So what are the first things that we tend to give up? Sleep and exercise.”

With the launch of HOTM in January 2011, Harvard has enhanced its promotion of exercise and health among the Cambridge community through programs that seek to offer exercise opportunities with others and is particularly for those who are not necessarily top-level athletes.

Director of the Harvard University Center for Wellness and Health Jeanne Mahon, who oversees Harvard On The Move, said that beyond community building, organizers hope that these programs “create an opportunity for the Harvard community to get outside and be more active.”

FROM BEGINNERS TO VETERANS

Contrary to their names, HOTM and HCMC recruit all members of the community to join their ranks, regardless of experience or skill.

“Despite the word ‘marathon’ in its title, HCMC is primarily not for marathoners,” Rodgers, who works as a psychologist for the Bureau of Study Counsel, said. “Rather, most people on the HCMC list typically run much shorter distances.”

HOTM participants have a wide range of physical abilities, from members who are just beginning to exercise consistently to more seasoned runners. Every year since 2006, a group HCMC participants have been selected to run the 26.2-mile Boston Marathon to benefit charity.

“It is a pretty wide spectrum. You have a bunch of marathoners who run really fast, and then you have people who are just running their first 5K,” said Peng, who is now a run leader for HOTM. “The benefit with that is wherever you are on that spectrum, you have someone who is running your pace, running your distance.”

HOTM run leaders inform students about upcoming runs through the groups and encourage students to attend. Through the program, participants earn points for the House Intramural program and can support the Houses in the Straus Cup standings.

RUN TOGETHER, STAY TOGETHER

Those interviewed said that the most appealing aspect of HOTM and HCMC is that they create communities to inspire healthy habits. Leaders from both HOTM and HCMC stressed the importance of community when discussing the success of their respective programs.

“I think [community] is important because most of the people who come on HOTM run recreationally,” said Jennifer Tu ‘16, who is a run leader for HOTM. “A lot of them didn’t do track and field during high school, and this is their way to connect with people in the community as well as have fun and keep fit.”

HOTM and HCMC serve to represent the importance of exercise by actively reminding the community that others are exercising as well, according to leaders of the organization. The HCMC mailing list has over 500 subscribers. Over the list, members post runs with their expected mileage, pace, and the location of where to meet. The list is also used to share running tips, such as where to run and what to wear.

“Some people who always prefer to run alone say they like being on the list just because it serves as a consistent reminder that others at Harvard are running, which in turn motivates them to keep running,” Rodgers said.

Peng added that the motivation to exercise comes not only from knowing that people are exercising, but also from exercising together.

“If you run for four hours by yourself it is miserable, at least for some people,” she said. “For group running, it is a lot easier to get into it. It is always easier to run with a buddy.”

GOING THE DISTANCE

While these programs have been around for a few years—with HOTM launched in January 2011 and HCMC founded in the fall of 2005—this year, they have made efforts to attract new members of the community, including both faculty and students alike.

According to walk leader, Kayla A. Hart, who is also a staff assistant at the Center for Wellness, the programs do not get as much publicity as they should. Organizers have been searching for new ways to reach members of the Harvard community.

“We have been trying to put ads on the main employee site and ads on different places on campus. We are definitely seeking to find more opportunities about that,” she said.

HOTM plans to find ways to attract students through fun events, such as the Hash Run that happened earlier this fall, where runners followed an unknown path by tracing a trail of baking flour left by a run leader, and the Halloween Run.

“We are just trying to do more events that will get people who aren’t intense marathoners interested,” Peng said. “We are also looking at sponsoring fun runs and races and things like that.”

Peng added that while the programs should actively recruit new members, they must also remember to retain their veterans.

“I think it is a fine line between doing fun new exciting things but keeping it consistent so people who do show up know to come on a regular basis,” she said.