

Class Helps IUPUI Get INShape



That's what Liz Cohen found herself wondering – albeit in a good way – when she volunteered to participate in the physical education capstone course.

Cohen, a former triathlete and physical education teacher herself, had been through a bout of breast cancer and subsequent medications had saved her life but taken their toll on her body. Rachel Swinford, MS, a lecturer in the physical education department, recruited Cohen – who is also the assistant director for campus recreation – to participate in the new program while the two were discussing an upcoming program partnership.

The course is designed to be a service-learning opportunity. Under faculty supervision, undergraduate students perform wellness assessments and create individualized exercise regimens for adult volunteer “clients.”

The lab-like, senior-level course represents a partnership between the physical education department, the National Institute for Fitness and Sport (NIFS), and expanded last semester to include Governor Mitch Daniels' INShape Indiana program.

“This experience offers a review of all the skills they've learned and applies them in a real-life client-trainer setting,” says Swinford. “It takes all that theory and puts it to practical use.”

The course pairs a student with a community member, which mostly consists of IUPUI faculty or staff. Each pair works one-on-one in a formal exercise, ten-week program as they would with a personal trainer. Before commencing, there is an individualized fitness assessment to provide baseline data on things like height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol levels, etc.

The participants review the results, discuss client goals, create individualized wellness strategies, and then meet regularly at NIFS to perform workouts. Students often deliver additional weekly projects such as handouts about nutrition, home exercise assignments, tip sheets, text messages to clients, and other vehicles to keep clients moving and motivated.

Twenty-five students participated during the spring of 2010, and another

fifteen participated this summer. Swinford anticipates more growth this fall. She says it's a work in progress, and grading something like this is multifaceted.

“The students get graded on the development of their exercise prescription, and when they do the health screenings, they're getting tested on their skills,” she says. “We also want them to employ deeper thinking about their personal philosophy of training.”

To that end, students keep a journal and write answers to open-ended questions provided by their instructor. Each week those questions get more in-depth and thought-provoking.

“An early question might be, ‘What were your impressions before you met your client, and how did they change after you met?’ A little further down the road, a question might be, ‘What's your overall philosophy of training, and how did you work together to meet your goals?’”

The main idea is to set specific and measurable goals. If the client wants to lose weight, for example, resistance training won't be the only approach. Cardiovascular exercise will be prescribed, designed at a level appropriate for the client. After the ten-week program is complete, students conduct post-testing with clients to measure and evaluate progress.

For Cohen and her student trainer, Amanda Foland, the goals were defined with unusual precision. “My case was a little different because I taught physical education for a living for years,” she says. “Then I had the illness, got out of shape with the help of medication and needed to get back into the game. In some ways, my personal program was a little more advanced.”

Foland was the right person for the job. In addition to being a student, she'd been working in the health field for the past four years and had experience with special health needs populations.

“I listened to Liz a lot,” she says. “And since chemotherapy affects people in different ways, I also did a lot of research into those medications, their side effects, what they do to musculature, bones, joints, and ligaments.”

Foland would carefully make a lesson plan, but was willing to modify based on how her client felt on any particular day. “If we'd planned squats for the upcoming workout, she might say to me, ‘My knees don't feel up to this today,’ then we'd do something else to work out the same muscle group that didn't put pressure on her knees. Liz was good about vocalizing where she was and where she wanted to go – and that was helpful.”

Cohen is also vocal in her praise for the program. “I would recommend it for anyone regardless of fitness level, because they tailor it especially for you,” she says. “I told my trainer – and she's just darling – to teach me about core training and to push me, and she *did*. But if you just want to do more walking, that's great too.”

Swinford is also happy with the results of this new program. “It couldn't be more authentic or real, experience-wise, and at the same time, all our students are carefully supervised,” she says.

And Cohen adds, “It's a little like having a mentor along with you on your first job – how great is that?”

– Lynnell Nixon-Knight