

The elimination of the Health and Physical Education program at St. Cloud State University is not only a simple budgeting decision but is also a betrayal of the students who have invested in the university and trusted it with their future. Imagine being a freshman walking on campus, excited to begin your dream major, only to find out the program you're building your future on is suddenly being eliminated. For the HPE students of SCSU, this nightmare has now become a reality.

Many schools in the U.S. have been following a concerning trend of reducing and eliminating physical education programs and post-secondary education is no different. These decisions have significant implications for students' mental, social, and physical well-being. All across the country, and the world, concerns for physical and mental health, particularly in adolescents, are surging, yet the programs which are meant to prepare future educators to combat these issues are being terminated.

Understandably, budget cuts put a lot of pressure on schools. However, no school or school district would ever think of cutting Math or English. They are considered "essential" subjects and Physical Education should be no different. These programs and the children within them not only deserve but need high-quality educators. HPE can be a major contributing factor in students' overall health, fitness, and even academic performance, for better or worse. Therefore, universities that commit to preparing exceptional HPE teachers play a vital role in educating those who will create healthier communities and equip the next generations with the knowledge and skills for lifelong personal health and wellness.

Saint Cloud State University has a notable reputation for producing well-prepared teachers and leaders. In 2022 the university's College of Education and Learning Design ranked second in Minnesota, and in 2024 Forbes placed SCSU on their prestigious list of America's Top Colleges, noting the university's "focus on in-demand fields." Education is one of these critical fields and thus HPE should not be cut.

There is a prominent misconception that health and Physical Education is less important to the overall education and well-being of K-12 children. However, HPE is more than a roll-out-the-ball "gym class" or a chaotic free-for-all environment not conducive to learning- HPE is the first line of defense in our healthcare system by creating health literate individuals who are able to understand their personal health, what impacts it, and what steps to take to stay healthy. These classes are also critical in the development of social wellness and inclusivity among students, producing tolerant, respectful, and empathetic adults. Finally, studies show that students provided with appropriate health and physical education perform higher in other areas of their academic pursuits.

Some believe that adolescent students are sufficiently active outside of school through active play. However, the "2022 US Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth" found that only around 21-28% of children ages 6-17 years old participated in at least 60 minutes of physical activity." Physical education is especially important to children of marginalized

groups. Children with disabilities, for example, may be less likely to be included in play, either due to social oppression or because the other children simply don't know how to include those with varying abilities. Both reasons for exclusion are rooted in a lack of knowledge that would otherwise be taught in a PE environment. Physical Education offers a designated time for controlled and supported exercise and social responsibility skills.

HPE is for everyone, not just for those interested in or already involved in sports. These programs aim to provide children with a range of ways to be physically active for their own personal strengths, interests, and self-expression. Students are taught why activity is important for health as well as how it can impact social and emotional areas of their lives. These topics can of course include learning the movements and rules of sports so that they may confidently join in a game of pickleball or basketball, or make commentary at the Superbowl party with friends in their future. These lessons can also be an introduction to more obscure physical activities, adaptations, and safety considerations that students may utilize lifelong for injury prevention, and recreation.

These lessons and values are not confined to the classroom either. One organization, SHAPE America, strives to empower today's youth to participate at the highest possible level in PE and strives to support participation in activities outside of schools. There are many ways in which educators are promoting and encouraging student participation in physical activity outside of school. Many educators utilize evolving technology and can create various incentive programs via activity trackers, either paper or digital, for which students track progress and earn points for prizes or potentially field trips. Homework assignments for PE classes are not abnormal anymore either. Students may be asked to create a video presentation on a topic of interest, review technology, demonstrate activity safety, or classwide fitness "challenges" which can encourage enthusiastic collaboration. Additionally, educators may be a major factor in providing opportunities to students in need. For example, students who may not have access to equipment or play space at home may be offered a space in the gymnasium before or after school.

HPE is an important factor in educating the whole child. The national standards for these programs cover components for not only physical, but also mental, emotional, and social well-being. These programs also lay the groundwork for students interested in athletics, and those for whom formal athletics may not be an opportunity due to financial, environmental, or health reasons. HPE programs provide the basic building blocks for students to excel in school, recreational, or even professional athletic careers. Health and physical education teaches students essential life skills including teamwork, communication, goal setting, perseverance, and leadership which are valuable transferable skills across all academic disciplines.

An article about the perceptions of physical education from marginalized LGBTQ students states "Teachers play a critical role in the social ecology of physical education classes. They set the tone for interpersonal expectations and can intentionally or unintentionally promote unwanted harassment or social isolation" - or the opposite. Teachers are placed in a unique

position to not only teach but also model and uphold standards of social responsibility. St. Cloud State University prides itself on its inclusion of diverse populations, and the HPE majors of the university are just as devoted to cultivating a safe and welcoming environment.

Through Physical Education, children learn valuable leadership skills by assuming the role of team captain, group leader, or peer helper for various physical activities. Students are presented with opportunities to develop their confidence, decision-making skills, and ethical and inclusive behaviors. Good sportsmanship is a skill vital to fostering healthy and meaningful relationships later in life.

Understanding how to handle loss and be gracious when one wins are key in emotional and self-control. How someone communicates with others in these circumstances can affect their friendships and social reputation. Many physical activities that take place in Physical Education require clear, concise, and respectful communication- both verbal and non-verbal. In these activities students learn and practice articulating strategies, giving and receiving feedback, and resolving conflicts, skills that are transferable to other academic classes and life beyond school. Health and Physical Education not only promotes health and fitness but also equips children with essential life skills, critical to each student's personal development and future success.

The evidence for the importance of this program is not only found in the development of future generations but also in the teacher supply and demand statistics. It is well known that there is currently a teacher shortage in the U.S. and Health and Physical Education teachers are particularly important to include in these conversations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, health education specialist jobs are projected to grow faster than average by 2033. In less than a decade career prospects in this area will increase as the need for HPE educators is emphasized for their early promotion and intervention of physical and mental health.

Minnesota's government aims to create "Policy objectives that support the increased recruitment, preparation, and support for these teachers to ultimately obtain a professional license could have a significant increase in the supply of teachers" as stated in the *2023 Biennial Report Supply and Demand of Teachers in Minnesota*. Incentives currently enacted in Minnesota include grant programs, hiring bonuses, early retirement options, and loan forgiveness.

However, the shortage of these career specialists is only worsened by the termination of critical postsecondary education and preparation programs. All incentives utilized by the state of Minnesota to encourage teacher education and recruitment are actively subverted by the elimination of programs that are meant to guide and develop a new wave of education professionals. St. Cloud State's decision to terminate the Health and Physical Education program is now unfortunately a contributor to the state's ongoing teacher shortage in in-demand fields. Concerns for the adequate preparation of those in the discontinued program rise as the curriculum guide has not been confirmed and the program will soon be left without a field-experienced content area expert to guide these students to success.

With a current major count of 33 strong and yearly tuition costing roughly \$8,800 it's difficult for many to understand how a total revenue of almost \$300,000 would not be viable to support the program that these students have invested their futures in. Each and every one of the students enrolled in SCSU's Health and Physical Education degree program has dedicated funds and resources to further their academic experience and career opportunities at this university. Comparable degree programs such as Sports Management have 28 undergraduate students and 9 graduate students for a total of 37 students enrolled- only 4 more than the current HPE program- Yet Sports Management is allotted two full-time faculty members. Meanwhile, HPE has only one full-time faculty member. The adjunct professors of our program are no doubt knowledgeable in their areas of expertise, but the issue is that these professors are not fully knowledgeable or experienced in our pursued area of study. These decisions are not only confusing but also come off as unfair and biased. The students of this program are actively being set up to fail- losing resources, supports, and content area experts to lead us.

The St. Cloud State University "Academic Program Update" web page from July 24, 2024 states that they are "dedicated to student success" and that "100% of students who are currently enrolled in programs approved to suspend will be offered a clear pathway and adequate time to complete their degree." These statements feel empty and artificial when the students newly accepted into the program all agree that they had no idea that the program was due to be eliminated when they enrolled. And those currently enrolled feel unsupported and outcast by the university.

We, as students in SCSU's HPE program, chose this major and this institution with the expectation that we would receive adequate education and resources necessary to be successful. In exchange for the tuition and fees we pay, the university has a responsibility to provide sufficient support for our thorough professional preparation and growth. The elimination of our beloved program not only circumvents this expectation but also deprives future students of opportunities for meaningful, impactful careers.

This student body is passionate and willing to defend our major program and the experienced faculty members who lead us. Alumni of the program agree that they would not feel well prepared without the expertise and passion of content experts like Dr. Suits and Professor Wilson. Meanwhile, the newest class of 18 freshmen feel unnerved and misguided by the university's acceptance of them into a program just as it is being eliminated. The sudden elimination announcement of the program without prior consultation and transparency actively undermines the trust which students, and faculty, place in the institution and violates ethical obligations to the student body. Many in this program believe these hasty decisions should be reconsidered, not just for practical reasons but also on ethical grounds as they have betrayed the faith and trust that students have placed in this university.

The education of Health and Physical Education teachers is paramount to student and community well-being. The preservation of this program would reinforce the university's commitment to comprehensive education and societal impact by ensuring that its graduates are well-prepared to continue promoting and cultivating literate, healthy, and inclusive communities. High-quality Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs are mission-critical to K-12 children's health and well-being. Certified HPE teachers prepared by complete and thorough PETE programs are essential in shaping health trends and improving the welfare of students and communities nationwide

The decision to eliminate the Health and Physical Education major is more than a degree loss at SCSU- it is a setback for current students of the institution, future health and education professionals, and the communities we aim to serve. We, as students, have invested time, trust, and a significant amount of finances into this university and urge the administration to reconsider this decision. The preservation of this vital program would affirm the university's commitment to academic excellence, students' success, and a well-rounded community. By investing in this program St. Cloud State University has an opportunity to lead the way in health education and promotion. We ask the university to stand with us in protecting this valuable program and to seize the opportunity to create meaningful, lasting change in our communities, with this program as a cornerstone of our education.

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