



**HEALTHY
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The Role of Academia at the Intersection of Parks and Health

Aiko Yoshino is an Assistant Professor within the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Department at San Francisco State University. In addition to teaching classes on program design and the impact of outdoor recreational activities on participant stress levels, she also conducts research on topics such as the relationship between extended wilderness programs and resilience, and how natural settings impact attention restoration. In this feature Aiko sheds light on the role of academia at the intersection of parks and health.

1) What does the intersection of parks and health look like academically - is there a robust body of work? How have you seen research in this particular area change over the past 10 years? Where do you see it heading in the future?

Good question. A strong body of work is created not only by being based within a theoretical framework, but also by being tested in a laboratory setting. Currently there are a relatively small number of studies evaluating HPHP- and Park Prescription-type programs. For example, Park Prescription programs are based on Ulrich's (1981) Stress Restoration Theory that exposure to green space both decreases levels of stress and minimizes the impact of further stressors (Van Den Berg, Maas, Verheij & Groenewegen, 2010). Although there is a fair amount of research on the framework foundations of HPHP, there is limited empirical evidence about the efficacy of park prescriptions and HPHP-type programs. As a result, this may limit the willingness and ability of more healthcare providers to participate.

In terms of what the future of research at the intersection of parks and health looks like, I see three possible trends: 1) More multi-disciplinary studies (e.g., wouldn't it be interesting to combine neuroscience, social science, and GPS technology?), 2) Virtual reality as an outdoor experience (e.g., how does Pokémon Go or other virtual reality games change our relationship with nature and social cohesion?), and 3) Health and outdoor equity (e.g., how does the county's widening wealth disparity impact our health and access to the great outdoors?)

2) What are some of the challenges that come with doing research at the intersection of parks and health?

Initially someone might think that the idea of partnerships and collaborating with other agencies would be the most challenging part of conducting this type of research. This is actually one of my favorite aspects. Yes, partnering and collaborating with others does take a lot of time. But at the same time, you learn so much by working with HPHP program providers. Actually, the biggest challenge is developing and executing a highly robust research design while also working with HPHP program participants, park professionals, and healthcare providers. For instance, what if it starts to rain during data collection? How do we then inspire HPHP program participants to still participate in the study even though they will be less inclined to participate because of the rain? How do we collect data without taking up too much time from the actual HPHP program that is being held? These are the re-occurring challenges that come up when we work with real people in the field. But with that being said, I really like these challenges because it's like a giant jigsaw puzzle—there are many unknowns, but slowly one piece at a time the pieces come together to create one large picture.

Another challenge is finding research assistants that either have a large amount of experience working with diverse communities or who come from diverse communities. Oftentimes it is easier to attract research assistants who want to work in the outdoors, but who have limited experience working with communities who either speak very little English, or come from a background where getting out into nature is not part of their culture. For many participants coming from minority communities, being met by someone who they can identify with helps to make their first time park experiences less overwhelming. Luckily, within the research that Dr. Jackson Wilson and I are doing, Dr. Leticia Marquez-Magana in the Health Equity Research Lab at the SF State Biology department has been instrumental in providing substantial support to overcome this barrier. Her students and young scientists are not only talented with collecting and analyzing physiological biomarkers, but also bring a large amount of experience in working with diverse communities. In our study these students help in the collection and analysis of salivary data.

3) What do you think is the role of academia within collaboratives such as Healthy Parks Healthy People? How do you think academia can further the goals of collaboratives such as this?

In collaboratives such as HPHP, academia can further contribute to the work being done at the intersection of parks and health in three ways: 1) Evaluation and research, 2) Resource sharing (e.g. literature reviews, study evidence, and an academic network), 3) Educating future HPHP program providers and advocates.

4) Lastly, for those interested in becoming park professionals, what are some of the skills and training that they will receive when getting a degree in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism?

The answer is a lot! You may not know this, but the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism department at SF State offers both Bachelors and Masters Programs. Our program provides a space for students to either start or further advance their careers. At the undergraduate level, students may choose an emphasis from these four areas: 1) Events, Tourism, and Commercial Recreation; 2) Health, Wellness, and Community Recreation; 3) Youth Services and Nonprofit Recreation; and 4) Parks, Natural Resources, and Outdoor Recreation. At the graduate level, we offer a collaborative hybrid program where students

can eliminate commutes, which may be appealing to some folks who work full time or have families. Our graduate program prepares you to be employed in supervisory and managerial positions. Check out our website: [Undergraduate program](#); [Graduate program](#).