

**Bentley University Fitness Areas:
A Tangent and Looking Back**
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During the week of spring break, the administration decided to close the Dana Center rather than maintain it for the few students who remained on campus. As such, the primary location for the ongoing ethnographic study had become inaccessible, so I turned this setback into an opportunity to explore another gym in the area, the Boston Sports Club (BSC) in Lexington. I did this to view first hand the differences between Bentley's athletic facilities, which are presented more as a free benefit to students, and a commercial gym, which depends on their patrons to pay for memberships and services in order to stay afloat. Could certain aspects of the commercial gym be transferred over to Bentley's gym to benefit the patrons? Besides the previously-mentioned nearby restaurant locations, are there other unique factors in Bentley's gym that can be utilized as a positive aspect to encourage people to go to the gym? These were just a few questions I aimed to investigate.

Exploring the Boston Sports Club

I signed up for a 30 day trial at BSC on their website, at a cost of \$30. The signup process was relatively simple, and I just needed to walk in with my license to get my membership card. There were three reasons I picked this gym. The altruistic reason was because I wanted to avoid a gym that was heavily ingrained in competitiveness, such as boxing or bodybuilding. While there was a time when gyms were dominated by men, fitness centers have made great changes that leveled the gender demographic, especially in affluent areas (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). Due to the current gender diversity and the affluent aura at Bentley in general, I wanted to find a gym that better aligned with this philosophy, so finding a gym that presents itself as a wellness center rather than a traditional gym was advised. Secondly, I've had past experience with this facility as a high school and college student, working as a

lifeguard in the outdoor facilities in the summers. Finally, the relatively cheap onboarding cost for the brief period of use and the non-pushy attitude of the service makes it a good short-term study subject.

The location of the gym was on the other side of town from where I live. I drove over to the facility in the early evening the first time for my first workout and ethnographic study. Since patrons of the BSC need to drive to this facility, there is ample parking available for patrons. The number of parking spaces is especially large when compared to the number of nearby parking spaces near the Dana Center, since many of the patrons of Bentley's gym are close enough to walk to the gym. The BSC facility is not as tall as the Dana Center, but there are both street level areas and below ground areas, and the building stretches out across their lot rather than being compacted. When I went in for the first time, I showed them my license, and they gave me a key chain tag that I can scan for future visits to the facility.

When I first walked into the main area to work out, I saw that the facilities are split up into a small room and a big room. The small room has the same types of equipment as the big room, but the quantity of the equipment is reduced to one or two. There is a window that looks across the larger workout area that people on stationary cycling equipment in the smaller workout room can see through. This room in particular touted a wi-fi signal that existed for whoever wanted to use a mobile device for accessing the internet, but no one in this room seemed to be using it. I asked the person at the front desk whether there was any access differences between the two rooms, but he informed me, after giving it some thought, that "There really isn't any difference between the two rooms. Some people just prefer to use that room over the big room."

The big room, in addition to the large amount of floor space dedicated to equipment, also touts a tall ceiling, removing the sense of claustrophobia that a low ceiling presents. There is cardio equipment such as treadmills and ellipticals on the far end of the room. The treadmills are close enough that two people who are working out next to each other could have a conversation. Immediately preceding the cardio machines are machines that are primarily built to focus on strengthening lower body muscles such as calves and thighs. Then, there is an area covered in astroturf that allowed for more free form exercises, with patrons using kettle weights, medicine balls, and hanging gyms. The rest of the primary workout area contains both free weights such as dumbbells and barbells and machines to help strengthen upper body muscles such as biceps and pectorals. These two areas are further separated, with the free weights mostly taking up the back corner of this part of the room, while the upper body equipment can be found closer to where patrons first enter this part of the facility.

There is a clear path from the bottom of the stairs to enter the main fitness area of the gym to the locker rooms. The men's lockers are all tall and thin, with most of them have an imprinted number. In addition to lockers and restroom amenities, the locker room includes showers and a sauna. There is a door in the back past the showers that leads to the indoor pool.

There is space dedicated for stretching just as users are exiting the locker rooms. There are blue mats laid on the ground for people to stretch before they work out. There were never more than 4 people who decided to stretch at once. This area is where some of the staff casually hang out until their duties need to be fulfilled. Most of these staff members are physical trainers, who can be scheduled ahead of time to guide patrons through the workout that's most appropriate for the client's needs.

When comparing the patrons of the BSC and Bentley's gym, there are several demographic differences between who's likely to be at the gym. The most obvious one is that there is a more diverse age range at BSC than at the Dana Center because the primary users at the Dana Center are students at the school. However, when it came to physique, there were far more overweight patrons at the BSC than at the Dana Center, with only one or two people I would consider overweight at Bentley's gym during my observations there thus far. A discussion I found relevant to this finding was presented by Nick Crossley in 2006 discussing the various reasons people begin going to the gym or continuously go to the gym. He stated that the most popular motivator when people sign up to go to the gym was to lose weight and to fight obesity. These people personally encountered some health scare that served as a call to action for taking better care of their own bodies. However, the students at Bentley are young enough that they likely never had that wake up call that motivates them to take better care of their bodies. Those who are currently going to the Bentley's gym were introduced to the facility by friends who went to that gym as well, which pertains to the social motivation that Crossley presented as an alternate reason for going to the gym.

I managed to speak to a patron of the BSC concerning his time at the gym while working out on free weights one morning. This patron, named Mike, is a man in his mid 20's and runs a family business with his brother. His brother and I were actually classmates in high school, and he was the one who recognized me. We chatted for a little bit and I asked him when he started using the gym. "Well," he began to explain as he was recalling his starting date, "I'm currently using a workout regimen that includes 2 days of upper body, 2 days of legs, and 2 days of core per week for seven weeks. I'm currently on day 21 of this routine."

“A seven-week routine?” I inquired. “How did you learn of this routine?”

“Well, a buddy of mine was determined to get fit before his child was born, so he performed this routine himself. When they had a party when she was born, he looked great! I asked him about how he got fit and he showed me the routines.” He bent his head over as if he was reading from a notebook or a mobile device. “I looked at the exercises, and I thought ‘yeah, yeah I can do these,’ so I started going to the gym in the mornings.”

His motivation for initializing his visits to the gym is an interesting mix of the two previously mentioned factors. When younger, the experience of a friend having his first child puts one’s current life situation into consideration. Simultaneously, his friend encouraged him to perform the routine by both showing him the details of the routine and by proving the regimen works. While I have discussed the inciting factor for going to the gym, I should also discuss a reason Crossley (2006) found people would end up maintaining gym attendance. He found that when a workout is scheduled, it becomes part of the daily routine, and people are more likely to keep with the regimen. The use of the word “routine” indicates that the patron made it a natural part of his day rather than something extraneous he has to do. Mike showed that he made this new workout regimen part of his day for at least three weeks. It might be interesting to follow up with Mike after seven weeks to see if he still feels the need to go to the gym.

The trainers, when hired by the patron, dictate which exercises to perform, guide patrons through the performance, and provides encouragement during and after the workout. The overall duty of a trainer is to serve as a liaison between the ordinary life of his client and the fitness-focused environment (Sassatelli, 2014). If a trainer is particularly skilled at his job, he

should be able to convince his client that working out is a fun and enjoyable experience, and encourage the client to continuously workout at the gym (Sassatelli, 2014).

One trainer showed her client how to do an alternative form of pull ups that requires the patron to lean back onto her heels while hanging onto a rope with each hand, and then pulling herself up and then slowly lowering herself while only using her arms. As the client was performing the exercise, the trainer was standing casually yet firmly in her positioning in front of the client and occasionally looked up and down her body. The trainer was watching her form as she was working out, making sure she didn't bend her legs or waist as she pulled herself up.

Another trainer got directly involved in the workout and performed the action that his client was meant to perform with the client. He took a large but lightweight medicine ball and instructed his client to catch the ball, slam it hard enough on the ground for it to bounce up to his arms, and then pass the ball back to the trainer. They stood approximately 6 feet across on the astroturf in the center of the gym floor as they passed the ball back and forth. Each time the client caught the ball, he yelled the number of times the trainer had caught the medicine ball, and bounced the ball on the ground and passed it to the client. After yelling the number 15, the trainer raised the ball above his head and triumphantly slammed the ball onto the ground, keeping his hands on the ball to prevent it from bouncing up. Such an action represented the pair completing a set of the exercise, and both people appeared tired. After resting and chatting to each other for about a minute, they performed a second set of the same exercise, repeating the previously performed actions.

The facility bans the use of cellphones in most areas, but I believe that this only bans the ability to talk on the phone or take pictures of people. There were people who used their cell

phones to play music while they were on machinery, and the staff did not object. One person decided to use a notebook that he carried with him as he was working out. Whenever he finished a set, he grabbed his notebook and pencil off the ground, sat up, and rested the notebook on his knee. He then wrote down the name of the action he performed, the amount of weight he used, and the number of repetitions that he performed for that set. After a minute of rest and reviewing his regimine progress, he continued his workout by moving to the next machine or getting into position for the next set. He used the notebook to track his progress as he went through his routine, and he would be able to view how much better he got at working out. There are several apps available for mobile devices that allow users to record workout progress. Was he using a notebook because he took the cell phone rules literally? Does he know that apps exist, or does he have an aversion to the programs or device in that environment? I didn't get a chance to question him, as he left before I was able to inquire about this information.

BSC provides patrons with towels from carts. The towels can be used to remove sweat after a hard workout or to dry off after showering. BSC also provide stations with sanitary wipes, as opposed to the paper towels Bentley offers. When it comes to working out, whether it's provided at the BSC or Bentley, the female patrons are more inclined to clean their equipment after use than their male counterparts, especially when it comes to the treadmills.

In terms of technology, there are large flat screen TV's on the side that play sports channels or news networks so people can watch while working out. If you're on one of the cardio-based machines, there is a small screen in front of you that you can use instead. The large TV's also included a channel called Sports Club TV, which appeared primarily as a marketing channel to show off the latest music for people to listen to while they exercised. However, every

once in awhile, the channel showcased how to perform a particular stretch, detailing which muscles were being stretched. If segments like these appeared more often, or if these segments were extended to exercises themselves, would people be more inclined to watch and mimic what's on the TV? The BSC may not present this information all at once to patrons because then trainers might be seen as extraneous, and BSC wants the extra capital for their bottom line.

While most of the workout equipment could be considered more traditional, a few of the machines were touted as part of a Strive series of workout equipment. These machines included a red, flat, egg-shaped item (See Figure 1) that guides the belt as the weights get pulled up. There's also a lever to adjust the amount of resistance the machine gives the user at different times depending on how far the user pushed up the weights. The idea behind the different settings is that the lever should be adjusted whenever the user completed a set of reps on the machine. There are instructions pasted on the machine to indicate the number of reps a user should perform and when to switch to another number of sets.



Figure 1: Track on Strive Machines to adjust weight resistance

All the machines also include a sticker with a number on it (see Figure 2). These stickers are used in correspondence with the ActivTraxPro app (for a fee) to give users a detailed workout regimen that a patron can follow when working out on his own. There's a secondary sticker that shows what track the machine is intended to be used for, the stickers read Primary, Secondary, or Supplementary. If there were a massive amount of machines, could you exclusively use these machines to work out certain parts of your body depending on your focus for that day? How many people would use these stickers to dictate what their work out for the day would be? If numbered in a particular manner that matches a workout regimen, could someone follow it without the app?



Figure 2: ActivTraxPro sticker

Back to Bentley

When Bentley's gym opened up again, I went back the evening after Spring Break concluded. While working out, I wanted to observe how people were going through their personal routines and if a pattern emerged from groups.

The first group I observed was comprised of 3 people, two males and a female, working out together. Two of the people were dating each other, and she seemed to mimic the exercises her boyfriend did as she stood next to him. One workout they did involved taking a small barbell in both hands while standing and holding the bar to their shoulder areas. They bent their arms at a 90 degree angle and returned the bar to the starting position, then lowered the bar to their waist area and returned it once again to the starting position. While he was working with 50 pound weights, she was working with 20, and the third person observed them as they worked out. When they completed their set simultaneously, they lowered their bars to the ground and backed up. She turned towards him and let him know "That was hard."

"But you did it." He smiled as he quipped.

They both smiled and went in for a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and took a leg and wrapped it around his leg, while he hugged her around the waist. While this was going on, the third guy picked up the 50 pound bar and started to perform the same exercise. He was about two reps in when they ended their kissing and watched him work out.

I saw a classmate of mine starting to use the bench press, and I offered to spot for him. While he initially declined the offer, he took me up on the offer after he decided to challenge himself in the number of reps to perform with those weights. When I got into position, he stated with pride "I'm gonna go for 8." Each time he lifted the bar, I counted the number of reps he completed and announced the number out loud. I gave him words of encouragement as he got closer to his target number, telling him that "you can do this" and "you got this." However, his face became beet red by the time he got to the eighth rep, his face almost in a panic as he tried to push the bar up. He shook his head, as if he knew he was unable to lift the bar up. After asking

him if he wanted me to take it, I grabbed the bar and put in on the rack. He looked somewhat defeated, but I tried to encourage him by telling him, “you did more than I could do at that weight.”

He looked at me and replied “Nah, this would be easy for you.”

“Actually, all my strength is in my legs.”

He was encouraged by this a little bit, but he still seemed skeptical. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to linger on the event for too long, and he continued working out.

At one point, he took a small dumbbell and he laid down at the corner of the room, extending his arm holding the dumbbell above his head. He then gradually stood up as he kept the dumbbell extended above his head, making sure his free arm and hand were the closest things to the ground. When he full stood up, he lowered himself back down to the ground in a similar manner, keeping the arm holding the weight fully extended upwards. After performing a set of this motion, he moved to the small barbells and performed bicep curls. He seemed to alternate between the bicep curls and this unknown routine in single sets.

While he was doing the bicep curls, I asked him about the exercise that he was performing concurrently.

“Those are called Turkish Get Up,” he explained after finishing his set. “They are a form of exercises that Turkish people used to do before they had gyms over there.”

“Wow,” I replied “How’d you learn to do that?”

“It’s something my roommate taught me back in college. You’re supposed to use kettlebells, but there are none in Bentley’s gym.”

I didn't realize that the only transportable free weights were dumbbells in Bentley's gym. While I can see the merit of having kettlebells and medicine balls in the gym, the lack of space would be difficult to overcome.

Reflections from one gym to the other

After visiting the BSC Gym, I have some ideas for improving the overall experience of Bentley's workout facility. Some of these ideas would not be feasible due to the need to change the architecture of the facility, such as increasing the ceiling height to make the workout rooms feel more spacious. Other ideas would only require a minor investment, or simple use of manpower to get the idea implemented. The BSC generally organizes their machines by the muscle groups that are being strengthened. Bentley should think about reorganizing the equipment so that equipment that targets the same muscles is in close proximity to each other.

One idea that I gravitate towards is the introduction and reinforcement of workout routines. How do patrons learn about new workout routines? How important is it for the person to stick to a routine in order to maintain his attendance at the gym? Would a person be more interested in a workout routine that they can simply follow rather than memorize? How could people keep track of their own progress? These are the questions I really want to answer over the next few weeks.

Sources

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