



Switching Stance: What Higher Education Can Learn from Skateboarders about Well-Being

Zoë B. Corwin and Neftalie Williams • January 23, 2023

When the *New York Times* ran a story in 2021 [about our skateboarding research](#), it highlighted skateboarding as a site of safety, community, and agency for youth from racially minoritized backgrounds. A faculty member at our institution, however, questioned the need to study skateboarding communities and wondered why we, the study authors, had done nothing to protect them from the perilous skateboarding students who traverse campus. Odds are *Academic Leader* readers have dodged a harried

skater en route from one campus building to another. A few might even bristle at the idea of skateboarders meriting research attention. Understandable. We recognize that skateboarders can appear to be reckless—or under certain conditions actually *be* reckless. Yet deeper scrutiny of skateboarders' dexterity reveals that their nimbleness applies to their movement not only through physical space but also through life. We posit that skateboarders offer expertise that might serve academic leaders well as they seek ways to support students' well-being.

Some background on our research

[Our research](#) provides a counternarrative to stereotypes of skateboarders by focusing on skaters from low-income communities or who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) or both. We have also dedicated attention to female, gender diverse, and LGBTQ+ skaters. A particular focus of our research is understanding the intersection of skateboarding, mental health, and community through documenting skateboarders' reflections on the challenges of stigmatization and the beauty of finding community and practicing wellness despite marginalization.

Our initial research focus was not on well-being; rather, we were asked by the [Skatepark Project](#) (formerly the Tony Hawk Foundation) to discern the needs of young people using the skateparks they develop in low-income communities and to understand their experiences amid larger societal contexts. Analysis of 2,500 survey responses and interview data from 100 skateboarders located in multiple US regions strongly demonstrated the value young people found in skateboarding to relieve stress and facilitate fun. This finding has particular gravitas given our current sociopolitical context, where more teens than ever are contemplating suicide and [experiencing depression](#) and [institutions of higher education are strategizing to meet the mental health needs of students](#). Skaters are no exception, with increased attention being funneled towards [mental health in the skate community](#). We recently wrapped up a [second study](#), funded by a New Strategic Directions in Research grant from USC's Office of the Provost, where we collaborated with 20 skateboarders (ages 18–30) who used documentary filmmaking to look more intensely into how skateboarding affects well-being. In what follows, we highlight lessons skaters have to offer postsecondary educators and administrators about supporting students' wellness.

Skateboarder-inspired lessons on well-being for higher education leaders

Unfortunately, little consensus exists about how to best support postsecondary students as they navigate an increasingly complex mental health landscape. Granted, skateboarders are a small subpopulation at any college or university. But is our hope that their unique vantage point might stimulate innovative thinking about how to connect with diverse students and support their well-being. Analysis of skaters' perspectives points to the value of focusing attention on people and spaces who are positioned on the margins.

Provide consistent and varied opportunities for students to speak with campus leaders. The skateboarders in our studies, many of whom were college and university students, discussed how they didn't feel "seen" by adults in mainstream institutions: they yearned for respect and valued people who took the time to connect with them. They also lamented the high cost of therapy and delays in meeting with therapists—an issue many postsecondary students share and one that institutions are attempting to address. Apart from therapy, skaters deeply appreciated less structured, more organic opportunities to simply talk and be heard. Consider which campus stakeholders—whether faculty, student affairs practitioners, or public safety officials—might be in positions to actively listen to students. Because they work with students, those stakeholders are positioned to mitigate feelings of isolation or marginalization. Students can benefit from connecting with caring faculty and staff in informal spaces, such as student

lounges and identity centers, or through more formal listening sessions publicized through campus communication channels.

Acknowledge the complexity of identity. Despite facing significant stigmatization from educators, family members, and larger society, skateboarders talk about their “skate identity” playing a significant and positive role in their lives. BIPOC skaters and female skaters acknowledged that while other facets of their identity play more salient roles, skate identity factors into their senses of self. Although colleges and universities have long recognized that intersectional identities affect how students navigate their postsecondary experiences—and even though many institutions have invested in identity-based programming—skateboarders clearly illustrate the importance of addressing the holistic and complex nature of identity. Efforts to support and engage students might prioritize aspects of students’ core identities that don’t fit into mainstream categories.

Seek leadership from students on inclusivity and wellness practices. Most wellness programming is designed by nonstudents who belong to a different generation than the students they serve. Consider integrating students into designing, implementing, and evaluating mental health and wellness resources. Skaters, for example, have an orientation toward creative and communal problem-solving when confronting challenges (e.g., how to recycle refuse to transform an empty lot into a DIY skate space). They embrace stress relief and play in short but productive increments (e.g., skating for 10 minutes as opposed to dedicating 90 minutes to a yoga class). Many skaters disconnect and pocket their cell phones while skating unless they are filming a friend. Holistically attentive to hazards, humans, and habitats, the contextual awareness and intentionality of skating facilitates mindfulness and social interaction. Skaters appear to generate joy in unique ways; “landing” a trick practiced unsupervised hundreds of times, for example, elicits feelings of deep personal satisfaction and belief in self. Furthermore, they relish connections with other people over shared interest. Skaters tend not to take themselves too seriously, and importantly, they engage in risk-taking that is developmentally appropriate while approaching challenges with a playful attitude. Quite unique insights on wellness, right? Turning to these students for guidance—or to other student groups who have unique wellness orientations and practices, such as rock climbers or spoken-word poets—could generate creative wellness ideas that resonate with students.

Dedicate spaces for students to organically build community. Given that many students struggle to find community on campus, especially those who don’t easily connect with traditional campus organizations (i.e., clubs or panhellenic organizations), how might campus spaces be used to facilitate community? Which campus spaces currently foster diverse community and align with student interests? And what can we learn from those spaces? Are there out-of-the-way spots on campus that go ignored or unused? If so, can they be redesigned to become vibrant gathering spaces? This is another area where we believe that skaters can guide us. The skate ethos is grounded in inclusivity, and in instances when people challenge inclusivity, the community organically regulates those voices and creates dedicated spaces where all participants feel uplifted. A skate space offers an opportunity for students to exercise, engage, and improve their mental well-being. Furthermore, the likely byproduct of building spaces to skate on campus is the cultivation of intercultural and intergenerational community both among campus constituents and with members from the broader community. For students who come from local communities and struggle to reconcile feeling disconnected from home community once on campus, having an opportunity to interact in a neutral space has potential to promote well-being. For student skaters, a campus-sanctioned skate spot is a clear indicator that the institution recognizes their value as part of the community and the potential of their sport. Campuses can provide a public good by offering students and community

members safe and fun spaces to learn and interact together. In doing so, institutions have the potential to create spaces for seamless, positive campus and community connection that promote well-being.

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