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 - [Sports »](#)
 - [Uncategorized](#)
-

You are here: [Home](#) » [News](#) » [Campus Events](#) » **Harvard professor underlines brain's need for physical activity**

Harvard professor underlines brain's need for physical activity

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By Franklin Bains

[Oregon Daily Emerald](#), U. Oregon via UWIRE

The Healthy Campus Initiative — a recent push to make the University eat healthier, exercise more and stop smoking — may now be heading in a new direction, focusing on the direct connection between brain and body activity.

This new angle has been largely influenced by Harvard University Medical School professor John Ratey, who spoke Friday to a packed room in Columbia 150 about the relation between exercise, nutrition, brain function and education throughout the human life . Ratey is an assistant clinical professor at Harvard and has authored or co-authored eight books about mental conditions — most notably attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

A common theme during Ratey's lecture was an emphasis on the importance of physical activity as play.

"It's built in ... something we need to do; we need to play," Ratey said. "We're moving out recess and P.E. and ignoring essential components of letting learners be better learners. ... the best recess was the one with the least equipment. That speaks to what play is."

But the backbone of Ratey's lecture was about the research he has done into the direct effects of exercise on thought.

"The question people always want to ask is, 'What's the minimum I can do?'" Ratey said, spurring laughter from the crowd. "The pre-frontal cortex is sleepy in people with ADD. This is the part that's always turned on by exercise. Brain volume increases with exercise."

Paul van Donkelaar, a University associate professor of neuroscience, was among those who worked to bring Ratey to campus. Van Donkelaar said he'll be working with others at the University in a roundtable format to find a clearer direction for the Healthy Campus Initiative.

"Where do we go from here?" van Donkelaar suggested as a question the Initiative will try to answer. "Hopefully, we'll create some actions to move forward from here."

Lou Radja, an international speaker and Portland State University alumnus, gave a short introduction detailing his work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, giving an example of improving the health of a community. After the lecture, Radja offered a message similar to van Donkelaar's about how the knowledge Ratey has shared with the audience should now be put to good use.

"Oh, it was great; I was anxious to listen to (Ratey)," Radja said of the lecturer after he had finished. "I thought it was a healthy dose of both knowledge and action ... I am hopeful people can act. Faith without action is dead."

Anne Summers, founder and director of Healthy In Oregon, a statewide community health advocacy group, had a direct connection with Ratey and was able to encourage his and Radja's participation.

Toward the end, Ratey opened the floor to a short question-and-answer period, and one of the last questions came from Eugene 4J physical education teacher Rachel Farkas.

Farkas said afterward she would like the opportunity to learn more about the community-wellness efforts. She thought an effective option would be to see more University students helping in the local schools.

"We need to know more about it," Farkas said. "I think it would be great to have college students on campuses ... our kids need more role models."

Ratey said he thought the event was well-organized and was impressed by the campus and community attendance, despite it landing on a Friday night.

"A standing ovation is always nice to get," Ratey said. "I think (Healthy Campus Initiative) is a great idea — to put health in the minds of all students and faculty."

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