

Becoming a Group Fitness Instructor

A Career Guide for College Students

American Council on Exercise®

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Overview

This is an incredibly exciting time for college-age instructors to enter the group fitness industry. Over the last few years, the industry has continued to evolve based on the public's needs, resulting in the development of new fitness formats, including rapid growth in both outdoor and online workouts. Today, regardless of the modality or environment, group fitness is booming and highly qualified instructors are in demand.

This guide offers an overview of the profession and industry, as well as a blueprint for becoming a certified instructor. When it comes to a career in group fitness, however, there are many ways to find success. Throughout the guide, we'll feature career insights from established group fitness instructors, speaking on how they forged their own path to success through group fitness.

If you're looking to put your passion for health and fitness into a rewarding career that positively impacts the lives of countless individuals, then you're ready to be a group fitness instructor. No matter what type of classes you're looking to lead, having the skills to elevate exercise into an enjoyable and memorable experience can keep your career—and your community—moving and shaking.

“Group fitness instructors positively influence people to have an enriching relationship with physical activity and to develop a lifelong fitness habit — one day and one class at a time.”



Scott Goudeseune

CEO
American Council on Exercise

Group Fitness Defined

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) states that fitness instructors lead, instruct, and motivate groups of people of all ages and skill levels in exercise activities, including cardiovascular exercise, strength training, and stretching. The DOL describes the typical duties of fitness instructors as:

- Creating a routine or set of moves for participants to follow
- Demonstrating how to perform various exercises and routines
- Monitoring participants as they perform exercises
- Demonstrating, explaining and correcting exercise techniques to minimize injuries and improve fitness
- Providing alternative exercises during classes for various fitness and skill levels
- Giving participants information about nutrition, weight control and lifestyle issues
- Explaining and enforcing safety rules and regulations on fitness activities and the use of exercise equipment
- Providing emergency first aid, if needed

While most group fitness instructors plan their own classes, some instructors may also teach pre-choreographed routines originally created by fitness organizations.

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

Regardless of the modality they teach, group fitness instructors hold a unique place in the healthcare continuum. As a collective group focused on enhancing fitness and modifying risk factors for disease to improve health, the group fitness profession has an outlined scope of practice and standard of care, developed with the help of education and credentialing organizations such as the American Council on Exercise (ACE).

ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructors follow a scope of practice that includes:

- Developing and leading exercise classes that are safe, effective and appropriate for individuals who are apparently healthy or have medical clearance to exercise
- Conducting group exercise classes that are appropriate for the intended audiences using research-proven and published protocols
- Teaching correct exercise methods and progressions through demonstration, explanation, and proper cueing and exercise leadership techniques
- Instructing class participants on how to monitor exercise intensity using heart rate, perceived exertion and/or ventilatory response
- Empowering individuals to begin and adhere to their exercise programs using guidance, support, motivation, lapse-prevention strategies and effective feedback
- Assessing the class environment by monitoring and evaluating the room and equipment before and during each class session
- Educating participants about fitness-and health-related topics to help them adopt behaviors that facilitate long-term success
- Recognizing what is within their scope of practice and referring participants to other healthcare professionals when appropriate

Laws pertaining to the responsibilities of various healthcare professions differ by state and county. It is the responsibility of the group fitness instructor to adhere to the laws in his or her geographic area, as well as to abide by the scope of practice to provide safe and effective classes and avoid the legal ramifications of providing services outside of their professional scope.

Industry Landscape

Since its origins in the 1970s, group fitness has been a mainstay in the fitness industry, and it continues to grow and evolve. Unlike other health and fitness professionals, group fitness instructors can inspire, educate, and motivate dozens of individuals in one cohesive, inclusive, and compelling movement experience.

To help support this theory, ACE recently introduced the groundbreaking ACE RRAMP Approach™, which empowers participants to improve health, fitness and overall quality of life by creating a climate that fosters success. An acronym for respect, recognition, alignment, mistakes and participant—this is a practical tool instructors can use before, during and after class sessions to recognize and serve everyone who shows up to participate, optimizing the group experience and maximizing adherence and motivation.

SNAPSHOT OF THE PROFESSION

The pandemic proved to be a major disruptor to the fitness industry. As gyms and studios were forced to close during lockdowns, we saw the rapid rise of outdoor and online fitness. And while many commentators proclaimed the end of the neighborhood gym, the post-pandemic reality has a different story to tell.

In fact, according to the Les Mills 2021 Global Fitness Report, class occupancy has reached 120% of pre-COVID levels in certain markets, 67% of gym members say they still prefer working out in groups, and in-person live classes are nearly twice as popular as livestream classes done at home. A big reason for this strong drive for a return to

live classes is rockstar instructors, who are able to create a powerful atmosphere that motivates and connects club members.

While the numbers for live classes remain strong, virtual and outdoor fitness show no signs of going anywhere. Many members, including nearly half of millennials, who started attending classes virtually, ended up going to those classes in-person, as reported in the 2022 Mindbody Wellness Index: Fitness Report. And the 43% of clients who took part in outdoor exercise during the pandemic aren't likely to give up the opportunity to exercise outdoors in a natural environment, an activity that Queensland Health reports can boost self-esteem and mood, reduce stress, and even help manage symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The bottom line is that the demand—and therefore the hourly rate—for group fitness instructors is high, and only getting higher, especially with the increased demand for an incredibly wide range of group-based fitness offerings.



5.6 MILLION

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CLASSES TAUGHT
BY ACE CERTIFIED GROUP FITNESS
INSTRUCTORS IN 2021

“The group fitness class experience serves as a wonderful platform in which to nurture the connection that all humans crave. It’s really up to us as instructors to create a safe place where people can show up, be accepted, be celebrated and most importantly be themselves.”

Kimberly S.

ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor
Certified Since 2017

The Future of the Profession

With disruptions brought on by the pandemic, the fitness industry has demonstrated its adaptability by undergoing an impressive evolution in a short amount of time. Practically overnight, health and exercise professionals pivoted to outdoor and online workouts, while an increased awareness of ongoing bias and discrimination has led to concerted efforts to create truly inclusive spaces throughout the industry.

In addition, consumers have continued to fill neighborhood gyms, seek out boutique studios, and bring their dedication and high energy to small group exercise classes—be they indoors, outdoors, or online. This shows just how critical group-based exercise is to the fitness consumer, lending strong evidence that the sizzling group fitness market shows no sign of cooling off.

A few highlights of growing trends and expert predictions about the future of group fitness include:

- Increased emphasis on working out as a way to reduce stress, boost mental health, and enhance overall wellness
- Reduced emphasis on physical activity solely as a means of losing weight or looking a certain way
- Continued growth of group exercise in outdoor spaces or through online platforms
- Increasing interest among baby boomers to get or remain involved in physical activity to help prevent age-related injuries and illnesses, and an increase in focus for this group from the industry in terms of age-specific specialties
- Increased participation in modalities such as yoga and Pilates, including by individuals seeking low-impact forms of exercise and relief from arthritis and other ailments

Employment opportunities for group fitness instructors are expanding. While many exist in a health club setting, there are now more career paths than ever.

Opportunities to can be organized into the following broad categories:

Commercial Clubs
Boutique Studios
Self-employment
Independent Contractor
Community Recreation Centers
College Recreation Centers
Non-profit Fitness Centers
Hotels/Spa/Resorts
Corporate Wellness
Active Adult and Assisted Living Communities

"I chose to become an ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor because I wanted to help others fall in love with movement and fitness. Now I'm able to help others find the movements they'll enjoy over the long-term, improving both their physical and mental health!"

Ali H.

**ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor
Certified Since 2006**

10 Reasons why you should become a Group Fitness Instructor

- 1 You can reach countless people through one class experience across indoor, outdoor, and online environments
- 2 You can help people move better and function more efficiently in their workouts and daily life
- 3 You can create an inclusive space where all individuals can lovingly embrace their personal health and fitness journey
- 4 You will develop connections that transcend the group fitness environment, providing support through life-changing transformations
- 5 You can create classes that are safe, effective, and fun—so participants feel inspired to keep coming back
- 6 You can reach individuals in all kinds of places, including gyms, wellness centers, or community-based facilities
- 7 You can provide practical, science-based information that empowers class participants to take ownership over their well-being
- 8 You can keep your career exciting by teaching different class formats, like dance-based fitness, indoor cycling, aquatic fitness, group strength, and more
- 9 You can learn and grow as a professional in an evolving and dynamic field
- 10 You can make a living helping others become the best version of themselves

“I chose to pursue this career because group fitness classes are what made me fall in love with fitness. Through my own wellness journey, I lost 120 pounds, and now I have the privilege of helping people realize their full potential.”

Steven T.

ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor
Certified Since 2010

Becoming a Group Fitness Instructor

ACE has served as the world's largest non-profit health and fitness certification, education and training organization for over 35 years, with more than 90,000 certified professionals worldwide.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION

If you're interested in becoming a group fitness instructor, it's critical that you first get certified. Attempting to enter the field without a certification will significantly limit your career opportunities, income and clientele.

Earning a professional certification confirms you are competent and ready for the job. It gives employers and clients confidence that you have the knowledge and skills to design and deliver individualized programs to meet each client's unique health and fitness needs.

An accredited certification will set you apart from the competition.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF A GROUP FITNESS INSTRUCTOR

Certification exams should give an objective evaluation of an individual's ability to safely perform the job. A critical component of the certification process for any profession, including group fitness, is to identify the primary tasks performed by professionals on a regular basis. The specific tasks, accompanying knowledge and skill-related components that are tested for certification are initially established by a panel of group fitness subject matter experts whose work is then validated by several thousand practicing instructors.

The result is an outline of the major areas of responsibility for group fitness instructors, tasks needed to perform the job, and associated knowledge and skills necessary to perform the indicated tasks. This serves as the minimum level of proficiency and theoretical knowledge required to practice as a competent and safe group fitness instructor. These include:

Group Fitness Fundamentals

Gain an understanding of the role and scope of a Group Fitness Instructor, exercise and behavior-change principles, and the foundations of movement and healthy eating.

Preparation and Design for Group Fitness Classes

Learn choreographic methods and the basic components of a group fitness class; key considerations regarding apparel, equipment, and music; program design, including structuring and sequencing movements and developing a class blueprint; and onsite procedures and responsibilities.

Elements of Leading Group Fitness Classes

Learn about participation centered instruction, including participant learning styles and the teaching of multilevel classes; teaching techniques and styles, including cueing strategies and leadership considerations; the specific considerations stemming from teaching classes outdoors and online; and working with participants with health considerations ranging from cardiac conditions to low-back pain.

Professional and Legal Considerations

Gain an understanding of class participant safety including injuries and medical emergencies, as well as the legal and professional guidelines that all Group Fitness Instructors must consider.

The ACE RRAMP Approach™

The groundbreaking ACE RRAMP Approach™ empowers participants to improve health, fitness and overall quality of life by creating a climate that fosters success. An acronym for respect, recognition, alignment, mistakes and participant—you'll gain a practical tool to use before, during and after class sessions to recognize and serve everyone who shows up to participate, optimizing the group experience and maximizing adherence and motivation.

Becoming a Group Fitness Instructor

SPECIALTY CERTIFICATE VS. CERTIFICATION

There is a tendency in the industry to mislabel continuing education programs as “certifications” rather than “certificates” or “specialty certificate programs.” Certifications provide an assessment of professional competence, whereas certificates denote coursework completed on a particular topic. Weekend workshops focused on a fitness format or piece of exercise equipment provide group fitness instructors with new knowledge and skills, and the ability to offer new class modalities. This is essential for the career development of a certified professional, but it’s critical to understand the distinction between certificate programs and professional certifications.

UNDERSTANDING NCCA-ACCREDITED CERTIFICATIONS

Professional certifications should obtain third-party validation from an independent organization that accredits certification programs. The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) reviews and accredits certifications for most allied healthcare professions, including credentials for registered dietitians, athletic trainers, nurse practitioners and medical exercise specialists.

Within the fitness industry, IHRSA and the Medical Fitness Association (MFA) both recommend health

club owners and medical fitness facilities only hire professionals with NCCA-accredited group fitness instructor certifications. Based on this long-standing recommendation from two respected organizations, many employers now view certifications from an NCCA-accredited fitness program, including group fitness, as one easy way to distinguish between a qualified job seeker and an unqualified one.

Obtaining an ACE Group Fitness Instructor Certification demonstrates your commitment to excellence and the establishment of a solid professional foundation from which to thrive in this industry.

The nation’s most respected thinkers in health and fitness agree that NCCA accreditation is the gold standard.

“Exceptional group fitness instructors not only lead classes, but also serve as coaches who empower participants to develop a positive association with exercise by experiencing physical activity in enjoyable and meaningful ways.”

Jessica M.

ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor
Certified Since 2018

Becoming a Group Fitness Instructor

RAISING THE PROFESSIONAL BAR IN THE FITNESS INDUSTRY

In 2014, ACE joined several other leading certification organizations as a member of the Coalition for the Registration of Exercise Professionals (CREP®). Coalition members are committed to advancing the fitness profession and helping professionals, such as group fitness instructors, who have passed a competency-based program using an exercise certification exam that has been accredited by the NCCA, earn recognition as health providers.

CREP® advances its mission by maintaining the United States Registry of Exercise Professionals (USREPS®), an internationally recognized registry of exercise professionals who hold an NCCA-accredited exercise certification. The registry not only supports the career development of group fitness instructors and other accredited fitness professionals by advocating on regulatory issues and creating alignment between international exercise professional registries, but it also serves as a resource for the public by which to identify well-qualified professionals.

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

ACE offers interactive, cutting-edge materials and resources to accommodate any learning style to prepare you for the group fitness instructor exam.

The most comprehensive study experience is Advantage, with engaging videos, podcasts, expert-led webinars and practical assignments to reinforce key concepts. The self-paced, interactive digital learning experience guides you step-by-step through the fundamentals of human movement, class design, instructional strategies, and much more, empowering you to teach any class format with confidence.

You are allotted three hours to complete the computer-based group fitness instructor exam, which is comprised of 150 multiple-choice questions.

To register for the ACE Group Fitness Instructor exam you must be at least 18 years old with a current, government-issued photo I.D. and a current CPR and AED certificate. Visit our website [here](#) to view current CPR/AED requirements. You must register for the exam at least 10 days prior to your desired testing date (online registration available).

Please note that you are now able to take your exam from the comfort of your home through a Live Remote Proctor.

CONTINUING TO GROW AND EVOLVE

Due to the dynamic nature of the health and fitness field, it is essential that you remain at the forefront of the industry by continuing to develop your practical skills and expand your theoretical knowledge through continuing education—which can include webinars, conferences and reading professional publications.

To keep your ACE Group Fitness Instructor Certification current while ensuring your professional growth, you must complete a minimum of 20 hours (or 2.0) of ACE continuing education credits (CECs) every two years, in addition to maintaining a current CPR/AED certificate.

Succeed as an ACE Pro

To help ensure your success beyond certification, we're proud to provide unparalleled support to ACE Certified Professionals.

A few ways we support our pros include:



[ACE Pro Connect App](#)

Learn, grow, and connect in a social platform dedicated to our exclusive community of like-minded ACE Certified Pros.



[ACE® Pro Compass](#)

Navigate your career path through curated content and resources that help you define, develop and reach your potential.



[ACE Talks Podcast](#)

Listen to career-building convos with ACE Experts and special industry guests exclusively in the ACE Pro Connect App.



[ACE Job Board](#)

Find career opportunities on our job board dedicated to the hottest health and fitness-related jobs across the USA.

Next Steps

If you're thinking about becoming a group fitness instructor, your next step is to choose a Certification Study Program. If there is a club or studio where you'd like to teach classes, call and ask which certifications they accept.

By earning an ACE Group Fitness Instructor Certification, you will be part of an organization that advocates on your behalf every day—among policymakers, among community partners who share our vision of eliminating the physical-inactivity epidemic and among employers exploring workplace wellness solutions.

MAKE MOVEMENT YOUR MISSION

For more information on how to become an
ACE® Certified Group Fitness Instructor contact us
at [888.519.9841](tel:888.519.9841) Option 7 or visit
ACEfitness.org/Student

“Becoming a certified group fitness instructor has enabled me to reach participants with confidence, credibility, knowledge and integrity; and has helped open doors to further my education and advance my career”

Karen W.

**ACE Certified Group Fitness Instructor
Certified Since 2014**

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