





Beyond the Lap Lane

Reimagining University Pool Space

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

The most inspiring and cutting-edge aquatic facilities all share one common trait—they're inclusive, both in design and function. Their lasting effects on college campuses are multifaceted. Studies have found aquatic facilities to be powerful tools for improving student engagement and retention.



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For instance, a 2021 study in *Recreation Sports Journal* found that recreational facility usage correlated positively with GPA and retention. Moreover, National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) reports that students who participate in campus recreation feel more connected to campus and are more likely to stay enrolled.

The findings are encouraging but still don't reflect the full, transformative impact of aquatic facilities felt by students who are discovering healthy avenues for combating stress and the sedentary nature of rigorous study. Such spaces are also a great way to engage with new social groups and form lasting bonds of friendship and comradery.

Behind us are the days of swimming pools

being reserved primarily for the swimming and diving teams, leaving casual users by the wayside. Even competition pools can be adapted to include the broader student body. A clever repurposing of a competition pool took place this past fall at Brown University's Nelson Fitness Center, where students lounged on floaties for a cheeky screening of *JAWS*—made possible by adding audio and video capabilities to the scoreboard system. Beyond simple movie nights, pools with LED color-changing lights could offer nighttime "glow-swims" and dramatically lit aquatics obstacle courses during non-athletic hours.

With stainless-steel gutters, a competition pool can also be transformed into a space for kayaking, canoeing, and paddleboarding,

all without risk of breaking perimeter pool tiles. Movable floors or shallow zones can accommodate the familiar activities of pool volleyball or basketball. None of these additions interfere with the student-athlete training schedules; with a little imagination, competition pools become everyone can enjoy.

Current Trends in Aquatic Facilities

Current trends in aquatic facilities tell a story about how we can maximize values of inclusivity and sustainability, issues that prospective and current students champion. Modern recreational pool designs are most notable for their versatility. The goal is to create multiple environments within a larger ecosystem. For instance, shallow sun-shelves with loungers create a resort-like atmosphere. Beach entries offer both aesthetic and accessibility benefits, and spas provide ideal spaces for decompressing. Large shallow zones encourage students to socialize and can serve as spaces for fitness classes. Signature features like lazy rivers, waterslides, climbing walls or ziplines draw students in and make the pool a standout campus amenity. Custom tiling and color-coordinated deck equipment likewise reinforce school branding and spirit. Because recreation pool areas can be extended beyond the water, there is opportunity to create informal gathering and study spaces with pool decks that feature seating, umbrellas and Wi-Fi.

Located in Davie, Florida, Nova Southeastern University (NSU) is nationally recognized for its innovative approach to aquatic facilities design. Its aquatic center contains all the amenities students could possibly want: the largest competition pool and diving well in the state of Florida, heated pools, waterfalls, and indeed, a resort-style atmosphere. Its competition pool is convertible between Olympic (50m) and NCAA (25y) standards, dividable by a floating bulkhead. Its diving well includes a separate well with space for seven short-course yard lanes, featuring two 1-meter and one 3-meter diving boards. NSU's main leisure pool is a half-Olympic sized pool (up to 5 feet deep) that offers

year-round swimming inside the NSU RecPlex. Ideal for relaxation, the space around the pool features lounge chairs, shaded areas, and tables. The main leisure pool doubles as NSU's learn-to-swim program and is a popular spot for campus events. The university's rolling hills pool is particularly appealing—a resort-style pool equipped with beautiful landscaping, a rock waterfall, and a zero-entry point. Students can study in its indoor lounge or outdoor pavilion. What is especially remarkable about NSU's aquatic center is its sustainability, a commitment that reflects university-wide values. In 2012, NSU launched a project at John U. Lloyd Beach State Park, utilizing electric and solar hot water systems to provide 100 percent of the park's energy needs. It also utilizes a large energy storage system at its Central Energy Plant, which generates ice during off-peak hours to cool campus buildings, which results in energy and cost savings.

Princeton University's Dillon Gymnasium offers state-of-the-art design and technology that make it one of the fastest pools in the nation. The competition pool, known otherwise as the DeNunzio Pool, is an ideal setting for competitive swimming. It measures 50 meters by 25 yards with a minimum depth of nine feet and maximum depth of 17 feet, and it's framed by bleachers that accommodate up to 1,700 spectators. The pool has two movable bulkheads which allow for various course configurations for both swimming and water polo. Also installed is a brand-new sound system that complements the new 9' by 17' Colorado full-color LED video and scoreboard.

Central to current trends in aquatic facilities, it's notable that Princeton has embraced university-wide its mission of creating inclusive environments. This extends to the building and pool of Dillon Gymnasium, which are both ADA accessible. The spectator seating area contains designated spaces for wheelchair users, and the pool provides a hydraulic hoist for pool access. The gym also offers six private, gender-inclusive shower and

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changing areas. Community outreach is also a key component of Princeton's approach to inclusivity. The university offers swimming lessons with a positive and supportive learning environment, and its Campus Recreation hosts a Family Swim every Sunday afternoon in the warm water indoor pools. The Princeton Area Masters Swim program is another option for adults aged 18+ and is offered by the Princeton Recreation Department.

The University of Miami (UM) is home to the Whitten University Center (UC) Swimming Pool, an Olympic-sized outdoor pool located beside UM's Lakeside Patio. It serves as an example of how cutting-edge spaces engender sports excellence and foster community building. The temperature is kept at 83 degrees with +/- 2 degrees of variance, chilled during the summer and heated in the winter. The UC Pool offers short-course lap lanes, a low-board diving area, and of course a great deck for sunning, studying, or listening to music while enjoying the beautiful South Florida weather. The pool has been home to unparalleled talent as it has seen 27 Olympians, 41 National Champions, and 118 All-Americans. As the

home of the Miami Hurricanes Swimming and Diving program, the Norman Whitten pool is equipped with two 25-yard, eight-lane competition pools. The competition area also features adjustable components that provide an eight-lane, 50-meter-long course pool. Further, it offers amenities such as a diving tower, complete with a 5-meter, 7-meter, and 10-meter platform as well as two 3-meter springboards and three 1-meter springboards.

The Avery Aquatic Center at Stanford University is another example of how excellence in aquatic facilities facilitates not only sporting success but functions as an inclusive community that strengthens emotional, physical, and mental well-being. One of the largest outdoor swimming, diving, and water polo facilities in the country, the Avery Aquatic Center is home of Stanford's aquatic teams. The complex now includes four separate pools, one each for competition, diving, training, and recreation. The Maas Diving Tower takes its cues from the glass-and-steel elevator tower at Stanford Stadium and the glass elevator at Maples Pavilion. These three visually prominent structures form a trio of landmarks denoting Stanford's athletic precinct. Structural glass

windscreens allow spectators to see the divers as they ascend the tower. The competition pool was renovated to accommodate water polo, and thanks to the addition of nighttime lighting and a new shade canopy, the pool can host events in all four aquatic sports day or night. The center has hosted Olympic training games and served as a championship venue for Pac-12 and NCAA events.

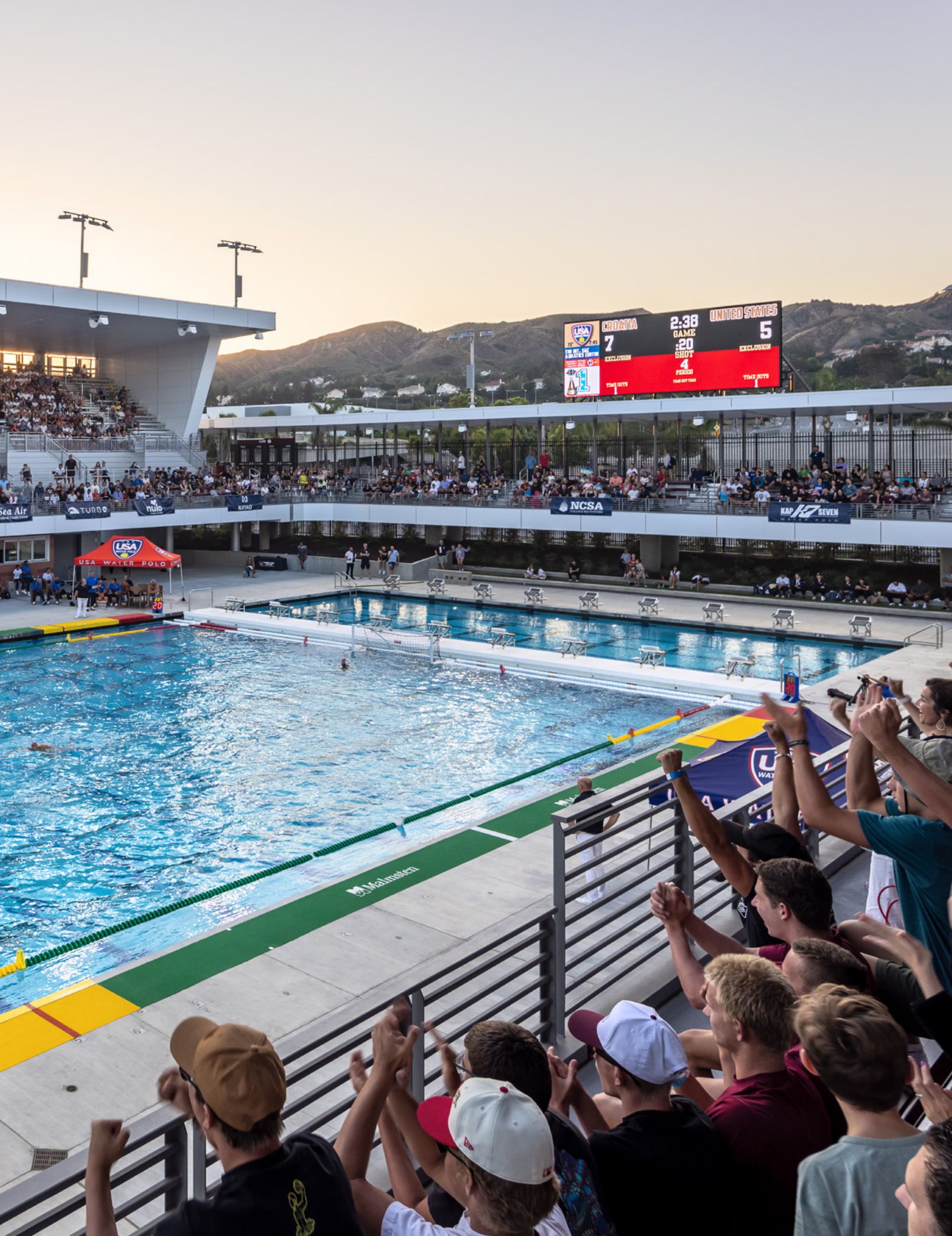
Marketing Campus-Based Aquatic Facilities

The best aquatic facilities in the country cater to a wide range of preferences and needs, ensuring that everyone can enjoy aquatic recreation to the fullest. But even the most well-designed aquatic spaces need a little boost in terms of maximizing usage and return on investment. Marketing is essential. Aquatics should be included in orientation tours and promoted at the start of the semester, when students are actively seeking ways to engage. Social media, campus signage, and student-driven events can generate buzz and create lasting interest. Through careful consideration during the design process, universities can transform their pools from underused athletic facilities into essential community spaces. With thoughtful planning and inclusive programming, aquatic facilities can become key contributors to student engagement, retention, and overall well-being.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David Vinson

has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.



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