

IMMERSED IN CAMPUS LIFE

Integrating Aquatic Facilities into College Recreation Programs

BY ED BAUER

When done right, aquatic facilities on private college and university campuses serve far more than just swim teams. From promoting student wellness and engagement to enhancing recruitment, retention, and even academic performance, a well-integrated aquatic facility can become a vibrant hub of campus life. To realize this potential takes more than opening the pool doors and waiting for students to dive in. It requires deliberate planning, targeted programming, smart facility design, and creative marketing. As institutions face increasing pressure to provide high-impact, wellness-centered recreation opportunities, many are successfully integrating aquatic spaces into broader campus recreation programs. Here's how they're doing it—and how your institution can follow suit.

The Strategic Role of Aquatic Facilities in Student Life

Wellness, community, and mental health are now critical pillars of student life—and aquatic centers, when properly programmed and promoted, can support all three.

According to the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA), students who participate in recreational programs—including aquatics—report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience and show stronger retention rates. They also benefit physically, mentally, and socially. Water is a natural equalizer, offering a joint-friendly, calming, and inclusive space that accommodates all fitness levels.

Beyond lap swim and swim lessons, forward-thinking institutions are reimaging aquatic centers as central gathering spaces: places where students can relax, train, socialize, or rehabilitate from injuries. From log-rolling competitions and water basketball to aquatic yoga and scuba classes, there are dozens of ways to activate an aquatic center.

Begin with Purpose: Define Your Facility's Mission

Before diving into new programming, define how the aquatic facility fits into your institution's broader mission. Is your goal to support competitive swimming? Improve student wellness? Offer therapeutic programming? Serve the local community? Support academic courses such as kinesiology or lifeguard training?

At Butler University in Indianapolis, the Health and Recreation Complex (HRC) integrates its aquatic offerings into a holistic wellness mission. The HRC pool supports everything from fitness swims and group exercise classes to CPR and lifeguard training, tying into both recreational and academic goals.

Your mission statement should help determine pool features, staffing levels, partnerships, and budgets. The more integrated your vision, the easier it is to justify the investment and attract participation across multiple departments.

Designing for Engagement: Build the Right Space

If your campus is in the planning or renovation stages, architectural design plays a critical role in how successfully your aquatic facility can be used across campus life. The most effective spaces balance competition-level function with flexibility for recreational and therapeutic use.

The University of St. Thomas in Minnesota recently completed a renovation of its aquatic facility that includes both a 25-yard competition pool and a separate leisure pool with warmer water, a whirlpool, and accessible entry. This dual-purpose approach allows the facility to serve varsity athletics, student recreation, and community partnerships without compromise.

Key design considerations include:

- **Depth variation:** Deeper water accommodates diving and water fitness, while shallower water supports therapy and games.
- **Accessibility:** Ramps, lifts, and zero-entry access make the space inclusive for all.
- **Visibility:** Consider adding pool-facing windows or open sightlines into adjacent rec centers to increase visibility and curiosity.
- **Technology:** Timing systems, digital signage, and pool automation enhance functionality and appeal.

Even small changes can dramatically increase usability. Heated water, flexible hours, and comfortable locker rooms create a more welcoming environment for first-time and casual users.

Develop Creative and Inclusive Programming

A well-designed facility is only as impactful as its programming. Successful campuses build diverse aquatics calendars to meet a variety of student needs.

1. **Group fitness in the water.** Aquatic fitness classes are popular among students who may not be drawn to traditional gym settings. Consider adding classes such as aqua Zumba, deep-water aerobics, water yoga or pilates, or resistance training with water dumbbells. These programs can be marketed as

low-impact, high-benefit alternatives to land-based classes—especially attractive during high-stress times like midterms and finals.

2. **Recreational Games and Competitions.** Fun and novelty go a long way in attracting student engagement. Examples include inner tube water polo, battleship with canoes, and log rolling—popular at Indiana University and Virginia Commonwealth University. Float nights with movies on poolside screens are another creative, crowd-pleasing offering. Student organizations can also sponsor themed events or friendly competitions between dorms, sororities and fraternities, or academic cohorts.
3. **Swim lessons and certifications.** Offering learn-to-swim classes, Red Cross certifications, and scuba diving classes (as provided by Barry University in Miami) not only generate revenue but support student safety and life skills. Many college students arrive with little or no swim training, and filling this gap can be a key contribution to student wellness.
4. **Recovery and wellness use.** Aquatic therapy and hydro-recovery programs are increasingly common, especially when partnered with campus health or athletic training departments. Pools offer a great setting for mindfulness activities, post-injury rehab, or stress-reducing movement.

Staff and Student Leadership

No recreation program thrives without strong leadership—and aquatics is no exception. Student employees often serve as lifeguards, swim instructors, and program assistants. These positions develop real-world skills in leadership, communication, and crisis response.

Many campuses build peer-to-peer wellness roles into aquatics programs. For example, the University of Richmond employs student-led wellness ambassadors to promote pool-based events and encourage underrepresented populations to participate.

To ensure quality, offer certification reimbursement, ongoing training, and opportunities for advancement. A motivated student aquatics team can become your best

marketing tool.

Collaborate Across Campus

An aquatic facility succeeds when it transcends its physical space and becomes a shared resource across departments. Build partnerships to extend the reach and impact of your programming:

- **Athletics:** Coordinate with varsity and club teams for shared scheduling, event hosting, and marketing.
- **Health services:** Collaborate on stress relief events, recovery programs, or mental health campaigns.
- **Academic departments:** Offer kinesiology, sports management, or public health classes that use the pool for labs or practicums.
- **Residence life:** Co-sponsor wellness challenges or pool parties with housing staff.
- **Admissions and advancement:**

Showcase the aquatic facility in campus tours and donor campaigns to highlight student engagement.

Campus-wide collaboration positions the aquatic facility as an essential asset rather than a niche offering.

Market with Intention

Aquatic programming can sometimes suffer from the misconception that “pools are just for swimmers.” To fight this, successful institutions launch active marketing efforts to reposition aquatic spaces as places for everyone.

Key marketing strategies include:

- **Social media:** Share short videos of aquatic fitness classes, pool parties, or staff spotlights.
- **Campus events:** Set up pop-up booths during orientations, welcome weeks, or health fairs with giveaways and sign-up

opportunities.

- **Visual prompts:** Install screens or chalkboards in campus rec areas with daily pool schedules, photos, or QR codes to register.
- **Ambassador programs:** Leverage student leaders to encourage their networks to participate in aquatic events.

The University of Puget Sound hosts an annual “Glow Swim” with black lights and neon floaties, generating buzz and first-time visitors. These experiences often turn casual participants into regulars.

Measure and Adapt

Integration isn’t a one-time event. Use metrics to assess the success of your aquatics programming and adjust based on feedback.

Metrics might include:

- Attendance counts for different types



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of swim sessions

- Utilization by different student groups (tracked via ID scans)
- Revenue generated from lessons or special events
- Participant satisfaction surveys

Use this data to refine offerings, adjust staffing, and advocate for budget support. Make it a point to highlight how aquatic use contributes to broader institutional goals—like retention, inclusion, and student satisfaction.

Success Story: Emory University's Student Success Through Aquatics

At Emory University in Atlanta, the Woodruff P.E. Center's aquatic facility is central to the university's recreation program. By partnering with Emory's Campus Life Division, the aquatics staff co-hosts weekly "Swim & Study" nights during finals, combining relaxation with academic focus

in a calming environment. The facility also offers inclusive "Women's Only Swim" hours, aquatic wellness programming, and collaborative events with cultural organizations.

Their integrated approach has turned what might be seen as a specialized space into one of the most inclusive and popular components of campus recreation—proof that when aquatic facilities are intentionally programmed, they can serve the entire student population.

Make a Splash that Lasts

Incorporating your aquatic facility into the campus recreation program is not just about filling pool time—it's about deepening student engagement, enhancing wellness, and creating a stronger sense of community. By offering diverse programming, prioritizing inclusivity, collaborating across departments, and listening to student feedback, you can transform your pool into a cornerstone of campus life.

As students increasingly look for colleges that support their whole selves—mind, body, and community—campuses that maximize their aquatic facilities will find themselves not just keeping up, but leading the way.

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