



Maximizing Impact

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR CAMPUS AQUATIC FACILITIES

As private colleges and universities continue to invest in facilities that enhance student life, support recruitment, and serve broader campus communities, aquatic centers have evolved into far more than just competition pools. In this interview, Joshua Albertson of Natare Pools shares expert insight into the planning, design, and modernization of campus aquatic facilities. From balancing the needs of diverse user groups to incorporating cutting-edge technology and sustainable solutions, Albertson outlines the key considerations that can transform a traditional pool into a dynamic, multi-use destination. His perspective offers valuable guidance for decision-makers looking to maximize both the functional and financial impact of their aquatic investments.

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Planning and Design

When a private college or university begins planning a new aquatic facility or renovation, what are the most important questions administrators should ask before the design process even begins?

What is our budget? How will the facility be used (competition, training, recreation, instruction)? What types of programming will be offered? What are the local codes? How do we integrate accessibility and inclusivity? What do the community, students, and athletes want?

Many campuses are trying to serve multiple groups with one facility—athletics, recreation, swim lessons, and community programs. How can aquatic facilities be designed to successfully serve these diverse users?

The key to balancing the needs of multiple groups is a strong understanding of how the pool is currently used—or how users would like to use it. The more information we have,

the better we can assess what is possible within the available footprint.

Installing a moving bulkhead can open many possibilities for swim lessons, courses, and competition. A bulkhead allows the pool to be divided, enabling free swim or training on one side while accommodating lessons or water aerobics on the other.

What are some of the most common design mistakes you see colleges make when planning aquatic facilities, and how can they avoid them?

Understanding your audience is critically important. In other words, plan for multiple users and flexibility. The more you can offer—both to students and faculty, as well as through outside use (think revenue streams)—the better.

How have aquatic facility expectations changed on college campuses over the past decade?

In the past, college and university pools were often simple rectangular spaces used primarily by swim teams for practice and competition. Over the past decade, we've seen more elaborate designs that emphasize recreation and student engagement. Today's facilities often feature a more waterpark-like feel, with added amenities and visual appeal rather than a single-purpose design.

Renovation vs. New Construction
Many private universities have aging pools built decades ago. What signs indicate that a renovation is sufficient versus when a full replacement should be considered?

The biggest indicator is structural integrity. If the pool walls and floor are structurally sound, renovation is typically the more practical solution—especially with approaches like stainless steel gutter systems and PVC membrane systems. These upgrades can make an aging pool look and function like a brand-new facility while ensuring it is watertight.

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75%

of students use on-campus recreation center facilities.



68%

of students report campus recreation facilities influence their decision of which college/university to attend.



94%

of students report that maintaining a healthy lifestyle was important to them prior to enrolling in their chosen college/university.



What are the biggest challenges when renovating an existing campus pool while trying to keep it operational during the academic year?

The primary challenge is managing disruption. Whether the pool is indoor or outdoor, there will be a period when it cannot be used. This can be difficult for students and faculty, as aquatic facilities are often heavily utilized.

What types of upgrades deliver the biggest return on investment for older aquatic facilities?

Bulkheads, upgraded filtration systems, stainless steel gutter systems, and PVC membrane lining systems.

Technology and Efficiency

What new technologies in pool design, filtration, and water management are helping universities reduce operational costs?

There are significant advancements in pumps, variable frequency drives (VFDs), filters, and heaters. Cost efficiency is critical due to ongoing operational expenses, and reducing these costs *continued...*

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benefits the entire campus community.

For example, vacuum sand filters provide substantial savings by requiring less water, electricity, chemicals, and maintenance than traditional pressure filters. Additionally, the sand never needs to be replaced.

How can modern aquatic systems help universities meet their campus sustainability goals or support LEED initiatives?

Stainless steel is our primary fabrication material and has always been the foundation of our company. One of its key advantages is that it is recyclable and often made from recycled materials.

Additionally, vacuum sand filters operate with exceptional efficiency in both water and energy usage. A strong example is the Oakville Trafalgar Community Centre, which features stainless steel pools, PVC membrane systems, vacuum sand filters, and stainless steel gutters. The facility was awarded LEED Gold Certification in 2025.

Safety and Operations

What are the most important safety considerations universities should address when

designing or renovating aquatic facilities?

Compliance with current local safety codes and ADA requirements is essential. Facilities must be safe, accessible, and inclusive for all users.

How can facility design help make aquatic centers easier and more efficient for staff to manage and maintain?

From Natare’s perspective, installing a vacuum sand filter is a highly effective solution. It uses significantly less water and electricity and requires backwashing only every 30–40 days (or longer in some cases). Additionally, the filter media never needs to be replaced. Because the system uses compressed air instead of traditional backwashing, it maintains exceptional cleanliness cycle after cycle.

Student Experience and Recruitment

How do well-designed aquatic facilities contribute to student recruitment, retention, and campus life?

Aquatic facilities can be a major factor. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and university officials must recognize that what works for one campus may not work for another. A

well-designed facility aligns with institutional goals and supports the priorities identified at the start of the planning process.

A strong example is the Hiwa Recreation Centre at the University of Auckland. The facility was designed to enhance campus life and foster a connected, engaged community while supporting students’ social, physical, and mental well-being.

What features are today’s students expecting in a campus aquatic facility that may not have been priorities in the past?

Cold plunge pools and hot spas are increasingly popular.

For athletes, these features support recovery and rehabilitation.

For students, they provide relaxation and social opportunities.

Additionally, pools with a resort-style atmosphere—such as lazy rivers and slides—are becoming more desirable, creating a “college waterpark” experience.

Strategic and Financial Considerations
For colleges considering a new aquatic facility or major renovation in the next five to 10 years, what strategic advice would you give them today to ensure the project delivers long-term value?

Establish clear goals, plan for flexibility, and consider multiple revenue streams. Once these elements are defined, the rest of the process becomes more straightforward. Understanding what you want to achieve will guide the decisions needed to successfully reach those goals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Natare is a global leader in stainless steel pools and aquatic systems, providing innovative, custom-engineered solutions for commercial pools, resorts, and water parks worldwide—combining decades of expertise, precision design, and unmatched construction quality.

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