



Building the Next Generation of Campus Aquatics

Why Today's Private Universities Are Investing in Facilities That Support Competition, Wellness and Long-Term Sustainability

BY COUNSILMAN-HUNSAKER

Across higher education, aquatic facilities are evolving far beyond their traditional role as competition venues. Today, private colleges and universities are designing natatoriums and aquatic centers that serve multiple purposes—supporting NCAA athletics, campus recreation, student wellness, physical therapy, community engagement and institutional recruitment.

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As institutions continue to invest in campus infrastructure, aquatic facilities have become essential to delivering a broader, more versatile student experience while supporting long term operational and sustainability goals.

For more than 55 years, Counsilman-Hunsaker has specialized exclusively in aquatic facility planning, engineering and operations, helping colleges and universities develop facilities that balance athletic performance with efficient day-to-day management. Unlike multidisciplinary engineering firms that include aquatics as one-service line, the company's sole focus has always been aquatic environments, giving its team a unique understanding of how pools are designed, maintained and operated throughout their

lifecycle.

Designing for Multiple Campus Missions

Modern aquatic facilities must accommodate a wide range of users. Student-athletes require championship-caliber competition venues, while campus recreation departments need flexible programming space for lap swimming, fitness classes, aquatic instruction and community outreach.

Successful facilities also must satisfy administrators focused on operating budgets, sustainability objectives and long-term maintenance costs.

According to Counsilman-Hunsaker, the most successful university aquatic projects

begin with understanding how each institution intends to use the facility rather than simply designing around aesthetics. That approach has resulted in more than 500 university aquatic projects ranging from competition natatoriums and recreation pools to hydrotherapy suites, rehabilitation centers and wellness facilities.

Operational Experience Drives Better Design

One characteristic that separates specialized aquatic consultants from traditional design firms is operational experience.

Many members of Counsilman-Hunsaker's staff have served as swimmers, coaches, lifeguards or aquatic facility managers. That firsthand knowledge influences everything from lifeguard sightlines and swimmer circulation patterns to equipment access and mechanical system layouts.

The firm's services extend beyond facility design to include:

- Feasibility studies and master planning
- Facility condition assessments
- Mechanical and structural evaluations
- Code compliance reviews
- Risk management consulting
- Operations planning
- Staff training
- Long-term facility audits

This comprehensive approach allows institutions to evaluate existing facilities, plan future expansions and improve operational efficiency throughout the life of the aquatic center.

Sustainability Continues to Shape Aquatic Construction

With sustainability initiatives becoming a priority on many private campuses, aquatic facilities are increasingly incorporating technologies designed to reduce energy and water consumption.

Counsilman-Hunsaker integrates features such as variable-frequency pump drives, UV secondary disinfection systems,

heat pump technology, advanced filtration equipment and water-conservation strategies into many university projects. These systems help institutions reduce operating costs while supporting broader campus sustainability initiatives and certification programs such as LEED and SITES.

The company has participated in more than 70 LEED-certified aquatic projects and has contributed to the development of national aquatic design standards through organizations including the Council for the Model Aquatic Health Code (CMAHC) and the Pool & Hot Tub Alliance (PHTA).

University Projects Showcase Diverse Applications

Recent university projects illustrate the wide variety of aquatic environments now being developed.

New York University's John A. Paulson Center integrates a six-lane competition pool within a 23-story mixed-use facility designed to support the university's climate action initiatives. Southern Methodist University expanded its nationally recognized aquatics program with a new outdoor Olympic-size competition pool, while the University of Memphis developed the Mike Rose Aquatics Center featuring Myrtha pre-engineered pool construction, movable bulkheads and UV water treatment systems.

Private institutions have also invested heavily in aquatic infrastructure.

Washington and Lee University replaced its aging natatorium with a modern competition facility designed for future expansion, while St. Mark's School of Texas incorporated a championship-level competition pool into its \$58 million athletic center to support competitive swimming, water polo and physical education programming.

Aquatics Beyond Competition

Aquatic environments are also playing an expanding role in sports medicine and athlete recovery.

Facilities such as Syracuse University's Lally Athletic Center and the University

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of Alabama's Mal M. Moore Athletic Facility demonstrate how hydrotherapy pools, underwater treadmills, hot and cold plunge systems and rehabilitation spaces are becoming essential components of collegiate athletic performance programs.

These specialized environments provide year-round resources for injury prevention, rehabilitation and recovery while enhancing overall student-athlete wellness.

Planning for the Next Generation

As private colleges continue modernizing their campuses, aquatic facilities will remain an important investment in recruitment, wellness and community engagement.

Whether constructing a new competition venue, renovating an aging natatorium or developing a campus recreation center, institutions increasingly seek facilities that combine operational efficiency, sustainability and long-term flexibility.

For firms specializing exclusively in aquatic environments, success is measured not simply by opening day but by how effectively the facility serves students, athletes and campus communities for decades to come. That long-term perspective continues to shape the next generation of university aquatic facilities across the country.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Counsilman-Hunsaker is a nationally recognized aquatic planning and design firm with more than 50 years of experience serving colleges and universities. Its multidisciplinary team delivers innovative, sustainable aquatic facilities that support student wellness, recreation, athletics, recruitment, and community engagement while aligning with each institution's goals, budget, and long-term operational needs.

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