



Association of
Aquatic Professionals

Aquatic Facilities in Higher Education: Advancing Institutional Priorities

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Executive Summary

Decisions about campus aquatic facilities should not be based solely on the cost of operating a pool, but on the value those facilities deliver in advancing institutional priorities. Aquatic facilities support student success, health and wellness, workforce development, risk management, accessibility, and community engagement while serving as hubs for education, leadership development, and public service. When institutions reduce or eliminate aquatic programs, they lose far more than recreational space: they diminish resources that contribute directly to their educational mission. AOAP believes aquatic facilities should be recognized, evaluated, and supported as strategic institutional infrastructure that strengthens both campuses and the communities they serve.

AOAP Position Statement

The Association of Aquatic Professionals (AOAP) believes aquatic facilities are essential components of higher education that support student success, campus wellness, workforce development, risk management, and community engagement. Colleges and universities should prioritize the preservation, operation, and expansion of aquatic facilities and programs as strategic investments rather than optional recreational amenities.

The Issue

Colleges and universities serve as microcosms of society, and their aquatic facilities provide opportunities for education, recreation, health, competition, employment, research, and

community engagement that few other campus amenities can match. Yet despite their broad institutional value, aquatic facilities are often viewed as optional recreational amenities rather than essential components of campus infrastructure. As institutions face increasing financial pressures, aquatics programs are frequently subject to budget reductions that result in deferred maintenance, reduced operating hours, elimination of competitive swimming and diving programs, limited student employment opportunities, diminished recreational programming, and, in some cases, permanent pool closures.

At the same time, higher education institutions are being asked to address growing concerns surrounding student physical and mental well-being, foster inclusive campus environments, prepare students for meaningful careers, and strengthen community partnerships. Campus aquatic facilities uniquely contribute to each of these priorities by promoting lifelong health and wellness, providing learn-to-swim and water safety education, supporting adaptive recreation, creating leadership and employment opportunities for students, and serving as valuable resources for surrounding communities.

When aquatic facilities are reduced or eliminated, institutions lose far more than recreational space. They lose opportunities to improve student success, develop future aquatic professionals, reduce drowning risk through education, support employee wellness, enhance campus life, and fulfill their broader mission of public service. Recognizing aquatic facilities as strategic institutional assets rather than optional amenities is essential to ensuring their long-term sustainability and maximizing their impact on both campus and community.

Contributing Factors

Aquatic Facilities Are Not Recognized as Strategic Assets

At many institutions, aquatic facilities are viewed primarily as recreational amenities rather than essential infrastructure supporting student success, wellness, risk management, workforce development, and community engagement. During periods of financial constraint, programs perceived as discretionary are often among the first to experience budget reductions, despite the broad institutional value they provide.

Deferred Maintenance and Aging Infrastructure

Many colleges and universities are operating aging aquatic facilities that require ongoing preventative maintenance and capital investment. When budgets become constrained, preventative maintenance and capital renewal are frequently deferred in favor of addressing more immediate operational needs. While this approach may provide short-term financial relief, it often accelerates equipment deterioration, increases operational costs, creates safety concerns, and ultimately results in capital expenditures so significant that institutions choose to permanently close or substantially reduce aquatic operations rather than invest in rehabilitation.

Workforce Challenges

Aquatic facilities depend on qualified professionals at every level—from aquatic directors and facility operators to lifeguards, instructors, and maintenance personnel. Like many industries, higher education aquatics faces ongoing workforce shortages driven by increased competition for employees, rising labor costs, limited professional development opportunities, and a shrinking pipeline of trained aquatic professionals. Staffing shortages often reduce operating hours, limit programming, delay maintenance activities, and increase operational strain on existing personnel.

Limited Institutional Understanding of Aquatics' Broader Value

Decision-makers often evaluate aquatic facilities based primarily on operating costs, participation numbers, or athletic usage without considering their broader contributions to campus life. Aquatic facilities support student recruitment and retention, employee wellness, leadership development, drowning prevention, adaptive recreation, community partnerships, academic programs, and workforce development. Without recognizing these interconnected benefits, institutions may underestimate the long-term return on investment provided by comprehensive aquatic programming.

Institutional and Community Impact

An aquatic facility is one of the few spaces on campus that simultaneously advance nearly every major institutional priority.

Student Success and Retention

Aquatic facilities create opportunities for students to build community, develop leadership skills, manage stress, and maintain physical and mental well-being. Recreational programming, club sports, employment opportunities, and aquatic activities foster a greater sense of belonging and campus engagement, and these factors are consistently associated with student satisfaction, retention, and overall success.

Health and Wellness

As colleges and universities continue to prioritize holistic student wellness, aquatic facilities provide one of the most accessible forms of lifelong physical activity. Aquatic exercise supports cardiovascular health, rehabilitation, stress reduction, and mental well-being while offering inclusive fitness opportunities for individuals of all ages, abilities, and fitness levels. Faculty and staff also benefit from access to wellness programming that contributes to employee health, productivity, and morale.

Workforce Development

Campus aquatic programs serve as an important training ground for the next generation of aquatic professionals. Students gain meaningful employment and leadership experience as

lifeguards, swim instructors, pool operators, supervisors, coaches, and facility managers while earning nationally recognized certifications. These experiences develop transferable skills in leadership, communication, emergency response, risk management, customer service, and teamwork that benefit graduates regardless of their chosen careers.

Risk Management and Public Safety

Aquatic facilities provide opportunities to develop lifesaving skills that extend well beyond campus. Learn-to-swim programs, lifeguard training, CPR/AED certification, water safety education, and emergency response training contribute to safer campuses and more resilient communities. Well-managed aquatic facilities also demonstrate an institution's commitment to proactive risk management, operational excellence, and public safety.

Inclusion and Accessibility

Aquatic environments offer recreation and wellness opportunities that may not be available through traditional fitness facilities. Adaptive aquatics, therapeutic exercise, and inclusive programming help ensure that students, employees, and community members of all abilities have equitable access to recreation, rehabilitation, and lifelong wellness.

Community Engagement and Public Service

Few campus facilities serve as a bridge between the university and its surrounding community as effectively as an aquatic center. Through partnerships with schools, parks and recreation agencies, healthcare organizations, Special Olympics programs, nonprofit organizations, and community groups, colleges and universities extend their educational mission beyond campus boundaries. Community learn-to-swim programs, water safety initiatives, competitions, and special events strengthen relationships while addressing critical public health needs.

Institutional Reputation and Enrollment

Comprehensive aquatic facilities enhance the overall student experience while supporting recruitment and retention efforts. They contribute to campus vibrancy, support varsity and club athletics, attract prospective students and families, host regional competitions and events, and reinforce an institution's commitment to health, wellness, and student engagement.

AOAP Recommendations

Position Aquatics as a Strategic Institutional Asset

Frame conversations with campus leadership around institutional priorities rather than facility operations. Demonstrate how aquatic programs contribute to student success, wellness, retention, workforce development, risk management, accessibility, and community engagement.

Shift the conversation from the cost of operating a pool to the return on investment it provides across the institution.

Measure and Share Your Impact

Collect and communicate data that demonstrates the value of your aquatic programs. Beyond attendance numbers, highlight outcomes such as:

- Student employment and leadership development
- Learn-to-swim participants and water competency achievements
- Lifeguard, instructor, CPR/AED, and operator certifications earned
- Faculty and staff wellness participation
- Community partnerships and outreach initiatives
- Adaptive and inclusive programming
- Economic impact of hosted competitions and events

Regularly share these successes with campus leadership, governing boards, student affairs, athletics, and community stakeholders.

Champion Aquatics as a Wellness Resource

Actively promote the unique physical and mental health benefits of aquatic participation. Collaborate with student wellness departments, counseling services, campus recreation, disability services, athletics, and employee wellness programs to position aquatics as an integral component of campus health initiatives rather than a standalone recreation program.

Invest in Workforce Development

Develop intentional pathways that introduce students to careers in aquatics. Expand opportunities for student employment, internships, leadership development, professional certifications, and mentoring. By preparing future aquatic professionals, institutions strengthen both their own operations and the broader aquatic profession.

Strengthen Community Partnerships

Position your aquatic facility as a community resource by partnering with local schools, parks and recreation agencies, healthcare organizations, nonprofit organizations, Special Olympics programs, and public safety agencies. Expand access to learn-to-swim instruction, water safety education, adaptive programming, and workforce training while reinforcing the institution's mission of public service.

Advocate for Sustainable Investment

Work proactively with institutional leadership to support preventative maintenance, equipment replacement, staffing, and long-term capital planning. Emphasize that preserving aquatic infrastructure through planned investment is significantly more effective and economical than

responding to emergency repairs, prolonged closures, or facility replacement after years of deferred maintenance.

Tell the Story of Aquatics

Share stories that demonstrate the human impact of aquatic programs. Celebrate student employees who become leaders, participants who gain confidence through learning to swim, community members who benefit from inclusive programming, and partnerships that improve public safety. While metrics quantify success, stories illustrate why aquatic facilities matter and help decision-makers understand their lasting value.

Become an Advocate for Aquatics

Aquatic professionals are uniquely positioned to educate campus leaders about the broad value aquatic facilities provide. Every conversation, annual report, budget request, strategic plan, and community partnership is an opportunity to demonstrate that aquatic facilities are not optional recreational amenities—they are essential infrastructure that advances student success, campus wellness, workforce development, risk management, and community engagement. Through consistent advocacy, data-driven decision making, and collaborative partnerships, aquatic professionals can help ensure these facilities continue to serve their institutions and communities for generations to come.

Strategic Considerations

Strategic decisions about aquatic facilities should be guided by institutional impact rather than operational expense alone. When evaluated through the lens of student success, wellness, risk management, workforce development, accessibility, and community engagement, aquatic facilities consistently demonstrate value that extends far beyond their operating budgets.

Align Aquatics with Institutional Priorities

Aquatic facilities should be intentionally integrated into institutional strategic plans and viewed as contributors to student success, health and wellness, workforce development, risk management, accessibility, and community engagement. Positioning aquatics within these broader institutional goals helps ensure they are evaluated based on their overall impact rather than solely on operational costs or participation numbers.

Adopt a Long-Term Investment Perspective

Aquatic facilities require ongoing operational support, preventative maintenance, and planned capital investment to remain safe, functional, and sustainable. Institutions should evaluate aquatic infrastructure using a lifecycle approach that recognizes the long-term financial and operational consequences of deferred maintenance and underinvestment.

Foster Cross-Campus Collaboration

Aquatic programs achieve the greatest impact when they are integrated across multiple departments and institutional initiatives. Collaboration with campus recreation, athletics, student affairs, health and counseling services, disability services, academic programs, facilities management, and public safety can expand programming, increase utilization, and demonstrate the broad institutional value of aquatic facilities.

Measure Outcomes, Not Just Participation

The value of an aquatic facility extends beyond attendance figures. Institutions should evaluate aquatics using meaningful outcome measures such as student employment, leadership development, water competency, wellness participation, community partnerships, accessibility initiatives, safety education, certifications earned, and contributions to student engagement and retention.

Recognize Aquatics as Community Infrastructure

Many college and university aquatic facilities serve populations well beyond the campus community. Strategic planning should consider the role these facilities play in providing learn-to-swim instruction, drowning prevention education, adaptive recreation, workforce training, and partnerships with schools, healthcare organizations, and community agencies. These contributions strengthen institutional relationships while advancing public health and safety.

Invest in Leadership and Workforce Sustainability

The long-term success of collegiate aquatics depends on attracting, developing, and retaining qualified aquatic professionals. Institutions should support professional development, succession planning, student employment pathways, and leadership development to ensure aquatic facilities remain safe, innovative, and responsive to evolving campus and community needs.

Supporting Standards and Resources

While no single national standard prescribes the number or type of aquatic facilities every college or university should maintain, several nationally recognized organizations provide guidance that reinforces the strategic value of collegiate recreation and aquatic programming. AOAP's position aligns closely with these nationally recognized resources by affirming that aquatic facilities are strategic institutional assets that contribute to student success, campus wellness, workforce development, risk management, accessibility, and community engagement. Rather than evaluating aquatic facilities solely through operational costs or participation metrics, colleges and universities should consider their broader contributions to institutional priorities and long-term community impact.

NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation

NIRSA's *Space Planning Guidelines for Campus Recreational Sport Facilities* provides research-based recommendations to assist colleges and universities in planning, evaluating, and expanding campus recreation facilities, including aquatic facilities. Developed using data from nearly 200 higher education institutions, the guidelines encourage campuses to assess facility needs based on institutional enrollment, program demand, and long-term planning objectives rather than short-term operational considerations. The resource is intended to support institutions in making informed decisions about facility development, expansion, and renovation while benchmarking against peer institutions.

Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) for Higher Education

The CAS *Collegiate Recreation Programs Standards*, developed in collaboration with NIRSA, recognize collegiate recreation as an essential contributor to the educational mission of higher education. The standards state that collegiate recreation programs should enhance the "mind, body, and spirit" of students and other eligible participants by providing programs, services, and facilities that meet the physical, social, recreational, and educational needs of the campus community. They further provide a framework for assessing program quality, guiding continuous improvement, supporting advocacy efforts, and educating institutional leaders about the role recreation programs play in advancing student success and campus well-being.

Model Aquatic Health Code

While this position paper focuses on the strategic value of collegiate aquatic facilities, institutions should also implement nationally recognized operational guidance related to facility maintenance, staffing, emergency preparedness, and risk management.

Conclusion

An aquatic facility is far more than a swimming pool. It is a multidisciplinary asset that advances student success, supports employee wellness, develops future leaders, strengthens risk management, expands community partnerships, and contributes to the overall mission of higher education. Few facilities on a college or university campus simultaneously serve as classrooms, laboratories, fitness centers, employment hubs, athletic venues, community resources, and public safety assets. Recognizing aquatic facilities as strategic institutional infrastructure rather than as optional recreational amenities is essential to maximizing their value and ensuring they continue to serve students, campuses, and communities for generations to come.

Contact Information: Juliene Hefter, Executive Director

julienne@aquaticpros.org or 262-894-9772

or

Kirsten Barnes, Assistant Director

kirsten@aquaticpros.org or 636-698-3898

Learn More About Association of Aquatic Professionals at www.aquaticpros.org