



Game changer: Transformation in student-athlete care can drive health and wellness innovation

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ATHLETE WELL-BEING CAN LEAD TO IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE ENTIRE STUDENT BODY

Placing a premium on student health and well-being

Well-being is essential for learning and success – both on the playing field and off. Recognizing this, [the NCAA Transformation Committee recently released requirements](#) for a stronger, more holistic student-athlete wellness model. Taken together, these recommendations are among the most significant comprehensive health and wellness improvements in the history of the NCAA, and they will require college and university leaders to have well-thought-out plans for implementation across the enterprise.

“This is an important moment for college and university leaders to act. Like other young adults, college students have experienced a significant increase in the severity and prevalence of [mental health conditions](#), putting them at risk for retention and educational attainment,” said Huron’s campus health expert Sharon McMullen, R.N., M.P.H. “Students who hold marginalized identities experience disproportionately higher rates of mental health conditions, leading to health inequities for our most vulnerable students.”

IN BRIEF

- The NCAA has called for a stronger, more holistic student-athlete wellness model on Division 1 college and university campuses, a potential bellwether for higher education.
- Effective implementation requires a systems approach that prioritizes health policy and population-level wellness initiatives in addition to individual services.
- Advancing student-athletes’ well-being can have a halo effect on the people who live, learn, work, and play on college and university campuses.

“As noted in the Transformation Committee report, today’s student-athletes face new challenges that merit improved support,” said James Borchers, M.D., M.P.H. and president and CEO of the U.S. Council for Athletes’ Health. “For university leaders to successfully transform their programs in this dynamic and challenging environment, it’s going to take highly collaborative initiatives that bring in outside expertise and combine that with the perspective and knowledge across university programs.”

Four key questions to help campus leaders learn more about the new standards and influence on student health and well-being:

1. What is the current state of student health and wellness?

Since 2007, rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide have increased dramatically among 15 to 24-year-olds. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death in this age group, behind unintentional injury. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy has called this “the defining public health crisis of our time.”

“The impact on college campuses has been significant,” says McMullen. One sign of the times — many prospective students and their families now factor a school’s ability to provide mental health care into their college selection process.

The demands of the market are also changing significantly. There is a pressing need to prioritize healthcare literacy among college students, empowering them to advocate for their own health decisions. Campus leaders must recognize the value of on-campus healthcare resources in advancing that objective. At the same time, virtual healthcare options are evolving rapidly, and many institutions have turned to these services to augment on-campus resources.

2. How does the environment differ for student-athletes?

Student-athletes are a unique population with specific healthcare and safety concerns that must be considered. There is significant pressure on student-athletes to perform in their sport and pressure from the community via social media and other channels. Student-athletes are also often at risk for adverse health outcomes related to their sport participation. Training and competition too often have catastrophic outcomes, including permanent injury and death. Furthermore, the mental health and medical challenges student-athletes experience are compounded by the stressors they may feel in their everyday lives. Appropriate education, training, and policies are needed to protect student-

athletes and to train coaches, administrators, and healthcare providers regarding the unique issues facing student-athletes.

Student-athlete health and wellness is also unique in that the NCAA prescribes best practices and standards of care to which institutions must adhere to improve health outcomes for student-athletes and reduce risk and liability for the institution. These foundational standards are non-negotiable and must be observed by institutions with varsity-level athletics programs to protect student-athlete health, safety, and well-being.

3. What are the new NCAA Division 1 requirements for holistic student-athlete wellness?

The NCAA Transformation Committee has developed requirements for Division 1 institutions that will take effect beginning in August 2024. Institutions will need to attest to following NCAA-required best practices in several areas, including Cardiac Best Practices, Inter-association Mental Health Requirements, Independent Medical Care Requirements, Concussion Policies and Procedures, and Inter-association Requirements for the Prevention of Catastrophic Injury and Sudden Death in Athletes.

The committee also requires institutions to provide a mental health care pathway tailored to student-athletes. This includes access to mental health providers and education regarding specific strategies for developing good mental health and well-being hygiene. Institutions must also provide educational programming focused on career readiness and life skills. Coaches will also be required to complete annual education on several healthcare and safety topics.

It will be imperative that institutions evaluate the availability of in-person medical personnel at athletic events and develop venue- and injury-specific emergency action plans that are appropriately rehearsed and evaluated for all athletic events. If a catastrophic athletic event occurs, institutions will be required to conduct a post-incident review and make the findings available.

Lastly, the committee's report requires that institutions conduct comprehensive reviews and assessments of their athletic healthcare delivery system. This will require an examination of all areas affecting student-athlete health and safety.

4. What implications does the new NCAA model have on the way institutions support the well-being of the larger student population?

The NCAA is taking a bold step by mandating support for the well-being of its 170,000 Division I student-athletes — less than 1% of the nation's 20 million college students. Colleges and universities can foster well-being for all through cost-effective, theory-based, population-level models that infuse health into the institution's fabric.

Access to high-quality mental health and medical care and services is essential for those students who need them. However, this individual-level approach is limited. Colleges and universities should leverage [systems approaches](#) — which prioritize health policy and population-level wellness initiatives in addition to individual services — to create the conditions that advance the well-being of the people who live, learn, work, and play on their campuses.

"Today's student-athletes face new challenges and realities that warrant enhanced and holistic support," the NCAA Transformation Committee found. The committee's health and wellness recommendations have ushered in a new era in which institutions must universally recognize that student-athletes' well-being is paramount. The partnership between the U.S. Council for Athletes' Health (USCAH) and Huron will help university leaders realize this vision.

Preparing for the new student-athlete wellness model

To help spark your leadership dialogues on campus, consider the following questions:

- How does your institution proactively address the mental health challenges student-athletes face, considering the amplified pressures from both athletics and societal expectations?
- Is your intercollegiate athletics program prepared to meet the new NCAA Division I requirements for holistic student-athlete wellness by the August 2024 deadline?
- What framework or model will the institution adopt to comprehensively assess athletic healthcare delivery to identify and rectify potential gaps in student-athlete health and safety?
- What partnerships, collaborations, and population-level approaches exist to bolster the support of student-athletes' mental health?
- How does your institution ensure adherence to the recommended best practices and standards of care for student-athletes to promote their health and limit institutional liabilities?
- How does the institution track and respond to emerging health and wellness trends among the student population?
- What measures are in place to support students who hold marginalized identities who may face disproportionate mental health challenges?
- Does your institution promote a culture of well-being or rely more on individual-level clinical care and services?

For more about how Huron and USCAH can help transform your student health and well-being strategy, [contact our team](#).



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