

# Effective Strategies for Reducing Alcohol Risks and Harms Among Student Athletes

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# Executive Summary

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In 2012, The Coalition sought to identify and document best practices for addressing high-risk drinking and its associated harms among student-athletes. Our review of the research literature, case studies, and the experiences of campus-based practitioners resulted in this report.

Student-athletes are shown to be at greater risk for abusing alcohol than their non-athlete peers, and therefore at greater risk for experiencing drinking-related consequences. Of note, student-athletes are more likely to suffer academically due to their substance use, and more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, than are other students. Student-athletes tend to drink more during their off season, which for most is the spring semester. Additionally, team sport athletes are at higher risk than those participating in individual sports.

As colleges look to develop and evaluate programs designed to address alcohol use among student-athletes, our review uncovered a number of promising strategies and approaches for institutions to consider:

- 1. Correcting student-athletes' misperceptions of student drinking norms** by communicating data on students' actual drinking levels, as reported by national surveys of student-athletes or the general student population
- 2. Intervening directly with identified high-risk drinkers** by using a non-confrontational motivational interviewing approach that encourages student-athletes to consider changing their drinking patterns
- 3. Providing basic alcohol education** by mandating an online course that covers the effects of various substances on athletic performance, plus protective strategies for reducing alcohol and other drug use and their related harms
- 4. Implementing and consistently enforcing stricter alcohol policies** at the institutional, athletics department, and team levels—steps that many student-athletes say they would prefer.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Defining the Problem</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Special Considerations for Working with Student-Athletes</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>A Scan of the Evidence Base</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>Case Study: Winning Steps at SUNY Albany</i>	
<i>Promising Approach: Stanford Athletes Earn Course Credit for Social Norms Research</i>	
<b>Identifying Challenges and Opportunities</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<i>A Collaborative Approach at Virginia Tech</i>	
<i>Case Study: myPlaybook</i>	
<i>Case Study: Getting Coaches on Board at Harvard</i>	
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>25</b>

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# Introduction

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Research has repeatedly shown that college student-athletes are at greater risk for abusing alcohol and other drugs than their non-athlete peers. Knowing this, many college and universities have dedicated resources to programs aimed at this at-risk population, but often with limited success.

This publication is intended to assist campus professionals in their efforts to develop effective strategies for reducing risk among college student-athletes by answering the following questions:

- ✓ **What is the nature of alcohol use among student-athletes?**
- ✓ **What challenges do practitioners encounter when trying to work with this population?**
- ✓ **What are the evidence-based strategies for alcohol prevention efforts targeting this group?**
- ✓ **What best practices exist for creating effective programs aimed at this population?**

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## Defining the Problem

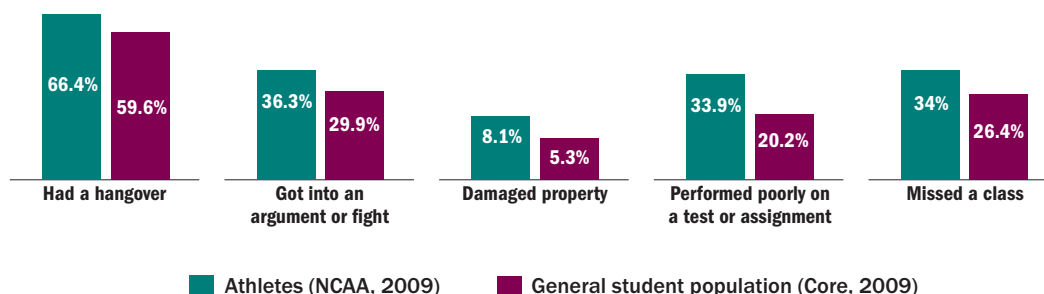
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Studies show that college student-athletes drink more alcohol per week, engage in high-risk drinking more often, and experience more alcohol-related consequences than do non-athletes ((Brenner & Swanik, 2007; Grossbard, Hendershot, Larimer, Lee, & Neighbors, 2007).

The drinking and drug use patterns of student-athletes lead to well-documented physiological consequences (see drugfreesport.com), but also to a higher prevalence of psychosocial consequences compared to non-athletes (Sabo, Miller, Melnick, Farrell, & Barnes, 2002; Leichter, Meilman, Presley, & Cashin, 1998; Grossbard et al., 2007). Of particular importance to coaches and athletic staff are consequences related to academic achievement. Compared to college students in general, athletes are more likely to report missing class and performing poorly on tests or important projects due to their substance use (see Fig. 1). College student-athletes are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors such as drinking before or during sex and having sex with multiple partners (Grossbard,et al., 2007)

In addition, non-medical anabolic steroid use, which is more prevalent among athletes than non-athletes, is associated with cigarette smoking, illicit drug use, drinking and driving, and alcohol use disorders (McCabe, West, Morales, Cranford, & Boyd, 2007).

**Figure 1: Negative Consequences Experienced by Student-Athletes and the General Student Population**



## The Link between Alcohol Use and Sexual Assault among Male Athletes

Allegations of rape against athletes at well-known universities, all involving alcohol use, have raised additional concerns among college administrators regarding student safety. Studies have shown that male athletes are overrepresented as attackers in sexual assaults and other sexually abusive behavior such as gang rapes (Frintner & Rubinson, 1993; Koss & Gaines, 1993; O'Sullivan, 1991). Many of these incidents have been attributed to the combination of masculinity

norms (e.g., wielding power over women, denigrating gay men, taking risks), which can often be held by male athletes, and problematic alcohol use. Therefore, prevention strategies directed at this high-risk group have the potential to decrease the risk of male athletes being perpetrators of sexual assault, ultimately improving safety for all students on campus including the athletes themselves.

*Source:* Alcohol Prevention Coalition interview

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## Special Considerations for Working with Student-Athletes

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College athletes differ from non-athletes, not only in the quantity and frequency of their alcohol and other drug use and the types of negative consequences they experience, but also in their patterns of use and motivations for using specific substances. Unique factors that influence student-athletes' decision regarding substance use highlight the need for campuses to identify and implement prevention programs that can meet the distinct needs of this population.

### **In-Season vs. Off-Season Alcohol Use**

Student-athletes, particularly first year students, are at greatest risk for drinking and experiencing alcohol-related consequences during the spring, especially among those on teams in their off-season, when they have become more socialized into the athletic culture (Martens, Dams-O'Connor, & Duffy-Paiement, 2006; Selby, Weinstein, & Bird, 1990; Thombs, 2000; Dumas, Turrisi, Coll & Haralson, 2007).

Student-athletes curtail their use of both performance-enhancing substances and alcohol during their competitive season, when mandatory drug testing occurs. According to the NCAA, during the competitive season nearly 60 percent of student-athletes report drinking less and just fewer than 27 percent report not drinking at all. These seasonal fluctuations in athlete substance use may be due in part to the fact that, on most campuses, more sports are scheduled in the fall and winter than in the spring (Dumas et al. 2007).

### **Motivations for Drinking**

Compared to the general college population, student-athletes are more likely to use alcohol as a means of coping with negative feelings and experiences (Read, Wood, Kahler, Maddock & Palfai, 2003; Martens, Watson, Royland, & Beck, 2005). As a result, student-athletes who drink to cope are especially likely to be frequent heavy episodic drinkers and to experience more negative drinking-related consequences (Yusko, Buckman, White, & Pandina, 2008). In addition to using alcohol to manage their negative moods, student-athletes also drink as a way of dealing with sports-related setbacks they may experience due to injury or other performance concerns (Martens, Labrie, Hummer, & Pedersen, 2008).

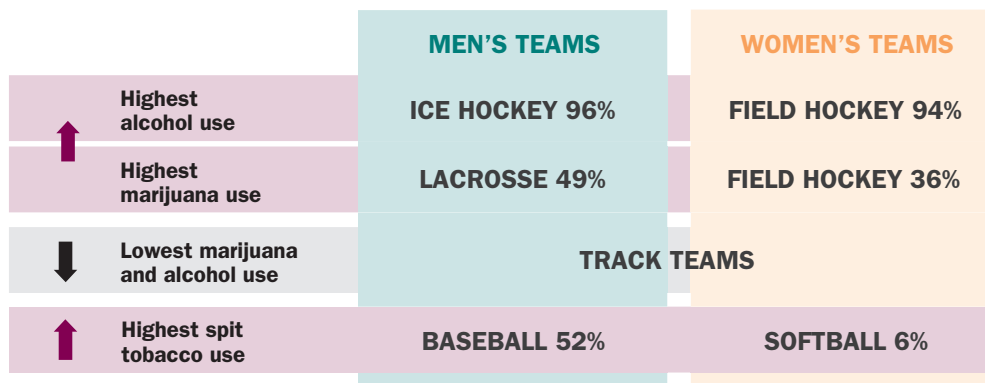
### **Sport Team Affiliation**

Another unique factor that influences student-athletes is their sport or team affiliation (Ford, 2007). Greater percentages of team sport athletes report engaging in heavy episodic drinking than do athletes participating in an individual sport (Brenner & Swanik, 2007). Team sports have a high frequency of social events involving drinking, which is associated with elevated alcohol use, an increased likelihood of drinking games, and the resulting negative consequences (Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Horton, 2008).

## The Competitive Mindset of an Athlete

The competitive mentality of the student-athlete is necessary for success on the field, yet can be a risk factor when it comes to high-risk drinking behaviors. Specifically, drinking games represent competitive contexts that encourage college athletes to engage in heavy episodic drinking, resulting in an increased likelihood of experiencing negative alcohol consequences (Geisner, Grossbard, Kilmer, Larimer, & Neighbors, 2007). In addition, participation in drinking games is a significant predictor of total weekly alcohol use.

**Figure 2: Alcohol and Other Drug Use by Sport Type**



### A Note About Pharmacological and Nutritional Ergogenic Aids

Strategies to address the use of performance enhancing substances by student-athletes are beyond the scope of this publication. One of the reasons for this is that use of these substances is significantly low in comparison to that of alcohol. For example, while football and baseball players are at higher risk of using human growth hormone (HGH) and testosterone boosters, fewer than 2% of these student-athletes report having used such substances in the past 12 months (NCAA, 2009). This may be due in part to the fact that higher percentages of baseball and football players are drug-tested by the NCAA than are athletes on other teams. Additionally, anabolic steroid use among all sports teams has significantly declined since 2005 (NCAA, 2009).

### Recreational and Intramural Club Sports

Participation in organized recreational and intramural club sports has been shown to be a significant predictor of total heavy drinking episodes (Jones, 2010). Many campuses point out that Greeks tend to be over-represented in club and intramural sport teams, and believe their Greek affiliation to be the main driver of the teams' at-risk behaviors. Research has shown, however, that regardless of race, gender, or Greek affiliation, students participating in intramural sports use alcohol at a greater frequency and intensity than non-participants (Ward & Gryczynski, 2007), with more drinks per week, higher typical and peak BACs, and more negative consequences—all of which may be due to their more frequent participation in drinking games (Grossbard, Labrie, Hummer, Pedersen, & Neighbors, 2008).

Recreational and intramural sports teams typically do not fall under the purview of the Athletics Department or NCAA rules. As a result, campus administrators are in a unique position to create policy and education requirements that can positively impact team members' drinking-related behavior. Determining how and whether athletes on intramural teams are engaging in risky alcohol use is an important first step in identifying where athlete-focused prevention resources should be directed.

Source: Alcohol Prevention Coalition interview

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# A Scan of the Evidence Base

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While there are limited studies on the impact of alcohol prevention strategies that target student-athletes, several approaches found to be effective for the general student population are beginning to emerge as promising strategies for student-athletes.

## **Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students (BASICS)**

This evidence-based program is most commonly used with students who have violated the campus alcohol policy or are problem drinkers. Typically, a trained campus professional administers BASICS, which uses non-confrontational motivational interviewing to give students personalized normative feedback on their drinking, provide information on their alcohol-related risks, stimulate self-reflection, and facilitate goal-setting to reduce their alcohol use. The program's goal is harm reduction, not abstinence. Providing this proven brief intervention strategy to student-athletes, with minor adaptations to specifically address the roles of sensation-seeking and drinking to cope, may be helpful in reducing their high-risk use (Yusko, et al., 2008).

Web-based tools that emulate important aspects of BASICS also hold promise. In one study, a web-based tool to deliver personalized normative feedback to first year intercollegiate athletes was found to produce significantly greater reductions in drinking compared to a web-based education program (Doumas & Haustveit, 2008). In another study, electronically delivered personalized normative feedback was shown to reduce student-athletes' weekly alcohol consumption and peak BAC levels (Martens, Kilmer, Beck, & Zamboanga, 2010).

## **CASE STUDY: SUNY Albany's Winning STEPS**

At the University at Albany, State University of New York, psychologist and prevention specialist Dolores Cimini oversees the STEPS Comprehensive Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention Program. This award-winning program targets particular groups of college students who are generally at higher risk for alcohol-related negative consequences, including first-year students (Project First STEPS), student-athletes (Project Winning STEPS), fraternity and sorority members (Project Greek STEPS), and students seeking health and counseling care (Project Healthy STEPS).

The program utilizes the BASICS model, with the recruitment strategy and personalized feedback profiles adapted to meet the specific needs of each target population. Students are screened using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Based on their AUDIT scores, students are then invited to participate in a brief intervention session with a trained psychologist at the University Counseling Center.

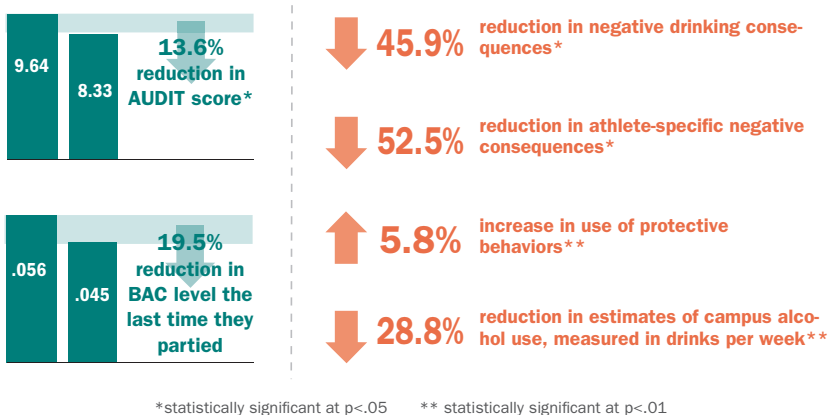
The purpose of Project Winning STEPS is to meet the unique and complex needs of student-athletes by providing not only accurate information on peer drinking norms, but also specific feedback on the relationship between their drinking patterns and their athletic performance. The program's objectives are to 1) reduce student-athletes' alcohol use, 2) reduce the negative consequences that can result from excessive use; and 3) assess the relationship between student-athletes' alcohol use and their athletic performance and self-confidence.



To evaluate the program, all Albany student-athletes completed the AUDIT online near the beginning of their out-of-season semester. Those who reported at least one occurrence of heavy episodic drinking (defined as 4 or more drinks for females and 5 or more drinks for males in the past two weeks) were invited to enroll in Project Winning STEPS. The enrolled students were randomly assigned to 1) Project Winning STEPS, conducted as a one-on-one session to provide individualized feedback, or 2) a team-delivered Alcohol Skills Training Program (ASTP) intervention to provide individualized feedback to each player, plus composite feedback regarding the entire team.

**Figure 3: Winning Outcomes**

**At 3-month follow-up, the student-athletes who participated in the face-to-face BASICS session demonstrated the following statistically significant changes:**



Note: The team-delivered intervention appeared to have less impact on students' drinking and associated behaviors. Only one statistically significant change emerged: students participating in the team-delivered intervention reported more accurate perceptions of campus alcohol use.

### Social Norms Approaches

College athletes who perceive alcohol use to be more common and more accepted by others on campus are more likely to report higher levels of alcohol consumption (Williams, Perko, Evans, & Barnes, 2009). Unfortunately, athletes, like other students, tend to overestimate how much alcohol other students report drinking, which can drive up their use of alcohol (Dams-O'Connor, Martin, & Martens, 2007). In response, researchers have found clear support for athlete-tailored prevention efforts that focus on correcting these misperceptions (Perkins & Craig, 2006; Turrisi, Larimer, Mallett, Kilmer, Ray, Mastroleo, Geisner, Grossbard, Tollison, Lostutter, & Montoya, 2009; Thombs & Hamilton, 2002; Martens et al., 2006).

When designing an intervention, the key question is which reference group's drinking norms should be highlighted. Research has shown that, in general, data on peer group norms better predicts individual substance use than normative data based on a national sample (Borsari & Carey, 2006; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). For student-athletes, however, the opposite may be the case. Some research has found that normative data from team members or athletes at their own school has less impact than data obtained from national samples of college athletes or typical college students (Martens et al. 2010; Grossbard, et al., 2008). Program designers will, therefore, need to determine which reference group is most meaningful to their institution's student-athletes.

## Promising Approach: Stanford Athletes Earn Course Credit for Social Norms Research

For the past three years, Stanford University has offered an intensive alcohol studies course to student-athletes and Greeks, titled *Alcohol Issues and the Campus Culture*. Students enrolled in the 10-week, 4-unit course are instructed on topics ranging from the intricacies of alcohol as a psychoactive drug to its impact on individuals, groups, and society.

Ralph Castro, the course instructor, director of Stanford's Office of Alcohol Policy and Education, and an associate dean of student affairs, familiarizes students with the alcohol-related risks that affect college students, including sexual assault, disrupted sleep, and negative effects on personal relationships.

A significant aspect of the course is the instruction that class members receive on research methods and health promotion program planning by creating and implementing a social norms campaign for their individual organizations or teams. Students are expected to conduct a health assessment of their group, including the most significant misperceptions held by their peers. From there, they must develop their campaign concept, implement the campaign, and evaluate its impact. Their final grade is dependent on an in-class presentation and formal research paper.

Castro recruits about 20 students for the class each term. The class is composed mainly of seniors, many of whom are eager to enhance their academic transcript with the inclusion of a research methods course.

## Consistent Policy and Enforcement

Consistency of enforcement is the key to any effective alcohol policy. As the NCAA has emphasized, "Even if an alcohol policy is current, relevant, and well-written, if it is inconsistent or not enforced, the policy will not be able to provide an effective legal framework" (Best of CHOICES, 1998-2008).

Despite the importance of having strong and consistent policies, only 17 percent of the NCAA's 114 CHOICES grantees from 1998 to 2008 addressed policy as part of their overall program (Best of CHOICES, 1998-2008). Recent grantees are addressing policy more often, but the historical lack of focus in this key area, and therefore the lack of evaluation data, makes it more difficult for

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**Student-athletes who do not drink  
would like to see stricter university  
and Athletics Department policies.**  
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— Williams & Barnes, 2010

campuses to improve the effectiveness of their policies for student-athletes. In response to this need, a number of campuses have begun to recognize that collaboration between athletics administrators and prevention professionals, especially those with experience in policy analysis, will help establish enforceable policies that can successfully reduce high-risk alcohol consumption among athletes.

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# Identifying Challenges and Opportunities

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## **Challenge: Time Pressures**

Daily four-hour practices, weightlifting sessions, travel, competition, and a full class schedule that includes making up missed classes and assignments—it's no wonder that coaches and athletic staff are highly protective of their student-athletes' time. Ironically, it is well-documented that participation in athletics can often alleviate stress (Hudd, Dumlao, Erdmann-Sager, Murray, Phan, Doukas, & Yokozuka, 2000); Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Kudlacek, 1997; Shirka, 1997), and yet there is also evidence suggesting that athletic participation itself can be a stressor (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos, 2003). That appears to be the case for more than 40 percent of male athletes and over half of female athletes, who report that the biggest contributing factor to their stress is “time” (Humphrey, Yow, & Bowden, 2000). For many of these athletes, an easy way to alleviate stress is the use of alcohol or other drugs.

Knowing this, prevention professionals will want to ensure that the time needed for alcohol and other drug education efforts is not viewed by coaches, staff, or athletes to be contributing to a student-athlete's stress. When looking to partner with athletics staff, it is critical to set realistic goals and expectations for your efforts to reach athletes, while being open to flexible scheduling. This might mean, for example, attending team meetings “after hours” or on a Sunday night, or waiting until the period just before fall classes start to engage teams that compete in the spring.

Consider the example of Virginia Tech (see page 11), whose student-athletes receive alcohol education during a one-and-a-half day orientation just before the start of classes. The only exception is the football team, whose players are trained as soon as the season ends. The athletes also complete bystander intervention training, with the spring sport teams trained in the fall, and the fall sport teams trained in the spring.

It is also important to work with coaches and trainers to learn about their concerns and priorities. Athletics Department staff will be more likely to stay engaged on this issue if they see that other campus officials understand and can accommodate the time demands placed on student-athletes and the pressures they often experience as “campus celebrities.”

## **Challenge: Public Image**

Student-athletes, especially those in nationally-recognized programs, understand that part of their responsibility includes maintaining a positive public image both on- and off-campus. The additional pressure of being held to a higher standard of behavior can take its toll on student-athletes' mental and physical health. Their competitive nature, that mentality that enables them to “play through pain,” can also result in their declining to seek help and eventually turning to alcohol and other drugs to self-medicate. Recognizing the intense public scrutiny that student-athletes often face, prevention professionals may have to be more deliberate and thoughtful when creating educational opportunities for this unique group of students.

Consider Dugan University\*, a Division I-A school, whose athletes are held in high regard by members of the campus community. When student-athletes at Dugan were found in violation of the university's alcohol policy or identified by their athletic trainer as high-risk drinkers, campus administrators would routinely refer them to the same program as other students on campus, a 10-week series of meetings based on the group motivational enhancement model. Eventually, the student-athletes voiced their concerns about participating in a group setting with non-athletes, stating that they could not fully participate due to the possibility that other students in the group might not respect the confidentiality rules and disclose negative

information about them. In response, the administration created a separate group specifically for student-athletes, which enabled them to be fully engaged in the process.

When developing effective strategies for student-athletes, it is important to be mindful of how they view themselves and their responsibility in terms of public image. Addressing these concerns, whether it be program location, or audience membership, can help alleviate student-athletes' anxiety and in turn make them more active and engaged participants..

## A Collaborative Approach at Virginia Tech

For 10 years Virginia Tech has been holding a one-and-a-half day orientation for first-year and transfer student-athletes, which takes place the weekend before classes begin. The only exception is the football team, who take part in programming over the summer. The orientation highlights information on specific campus resources including those related to alcohol and other drug use and sexual assault.

The alcohol prevention segment of the orientation program had always included a featured speaker. A change was made three years ago, however, after a group of student-athletes, along with members of Virginia Tech's athletic staff, attended the APPLE conference at the University of Virginia. Having connected at the conference with other student-athletes from around the country, they created a plan for athlete-centered alcohol prevention on their own campus. Following the conference, the student-athletes convinced Virginia Tech's orientation planners to discontinue the featured speaker and instead show the video "Haze," a documentary recounting the events that lead to the hazing-related death of UC Boulder freshman Gordie Bailey in 2004. Athletes now view "Haze" and then participate in a debriefing session facilitated by the school's sports psychologist.

Recognizing the increased risk of athletes for involvement in sexual assault, athletics administrators also required all first-year athletes to receive SAFE (Sexual Assault Facts & Education) training during the first six weeks of the semester, which was facilitated by members of the Women's Center and Campus Police. Later, in order to create a broader and more structured message for student-athletes, SAFE was replaced by the MVP (Mentors in Violence Prevention) bystander intervention program. MVP covers multiple topics, including sexual harassment, relationship violence, and alcohol and consent. The training uses athlete-specific language and scenarios to make the experience as meaningful as possible for the participants.

First-year student-athletes are required to participate in MVP during the first six weeks of classes, with upperclass students receiving training throughout the year. To initiate the program, 30 university administrators participated in a train-the-trainer program in the spring of 2010. Additional administrators are now being trained, including representatives from the academic advising office, the Women's Center, the student conduct office, and Athletics. In order to accommodate team schedules, spring sport teams are trained in the fall, and the majority of fall sports teams are trained over winter break and in the spring.

"We are not the experts," says Reyna Gilbert-Lowry, Virginia Tech's assistant director of student life for athletes, "We don't want to stay in our corner of the world. Collaborating with others on campus provides more resources for us and provides athletics staff with more access to other students at Tech. It's a win-win for everyone involved."

*\* This is a pseudonym for a university that asked not to be named.*

## CASE STUDY: *myPlaybook*

Prevention Strategies, LLC, an affiliate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, offers myPlaybook, an online education course designed to reduce alcohol- and other drug-related problems among college student-athletes. Dr. David L. Wyrick, an associate professor at the university, and his colleague Dr. Melodie Fearnow-Kenney developed the course through a grant awarded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

A small-scale randomized control trial with NCAA Division II colleges and universities provided initial evidence that the course reduces high-risk drinking, drug use, and substance use-related consequences. A large-scale, three-year evaluation that is jointly funded by NIDA and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is presently underway.

To learn more, go to: [myPlaybook - Evidence of Effectiveness](#)

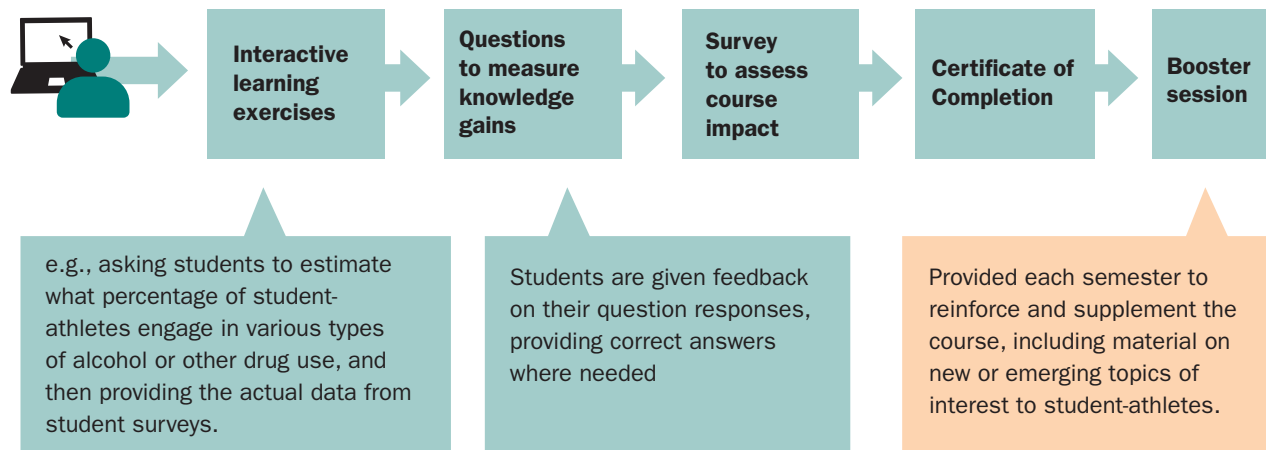
**Figure 4: myPlaybook Course Overview**

### Course Content

- The NCAA's role in drug testing and drug education
- Information about the NCAA's list of banned substances
- Effects of various substances, including prescription and over-the-counter medications, on athletic performance, training, and recovery from injury
- Protective strategies for reducing alcohol and other drug use and related harms

### Tools and Resources

- Access to the video "Drug Education and Testing," explaining NCAA policy and testing procedures
- Links to the Resource Exchange Center hosted by the National Center for Free Sport.
- Administrator ability to track students' progress in the course
- Downloads of the NCAA's list of banned substances.



## Support Materials

Prevention Strategies holds an introductory webinar at the beginning of each academic year, plus two fall and two spring “continuing education” webinars on implementation tips and other topics of interest. An Administrator’s Manual outlines step-by-step instructions on how to reset user passwords, create accounts for new users, create user groups, and generate progress reports. There is also a Coach’s Manual that provides ways that staff can reinforce myPlaybook’s lessons when working with their athletes. Finally, a quarterly electronic newsletter reports on successful implementation strategies, profiles successful student-athletes, and provides educational articles.

### Using myPlaybook: Best Practices

Based on practitioner experience, Prevention Strategies recommend that administrators consider using the following strategies to boost the course’s success:

- ✓ Mandate the course, with strict guidelines and consequences for those not meeting the requirement
- ✓ Inform all athletic staff—coaches, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches—about the course so that they can urge their athletes to complete it
- ✓ Include prevention messaging in the student-athlete handbook/planner
- ✓ Use myPlaybook in conjunction with other campus education programs

### Challenge: Engaging Coaches

According to the 2009 NCAA Member Institution’s Survey, only 8% of schools require all coaches to complete a drug/alcohol prevention program. Even fewer (3%) have a required education program for other athletics department staff. However, campuses that have had the most success engaging coaches and other athletics staff have found collaboration, rather than required training programs, to be the key.

To address alcohol-related issues among student athletes, prevention professionals must spend time fostering a collaborative relationship with coaches and other athletic staff who work closely with student-athletes. This means taking the time to understand the unique culture of an athletics department, allowing coaches and staff to identify what they believe to be the greatest needs of their student-athletes, and making clear that they are part of a working partnership, rather than “targets” of an intervention. As Harvard (see following case study) learned, this process can take time, but is essential to setting a foundation for successfully engaging these critical partners in prevention.

# CASE STUDY: Getting Coaches on Board at Harvard

## A Need Identified

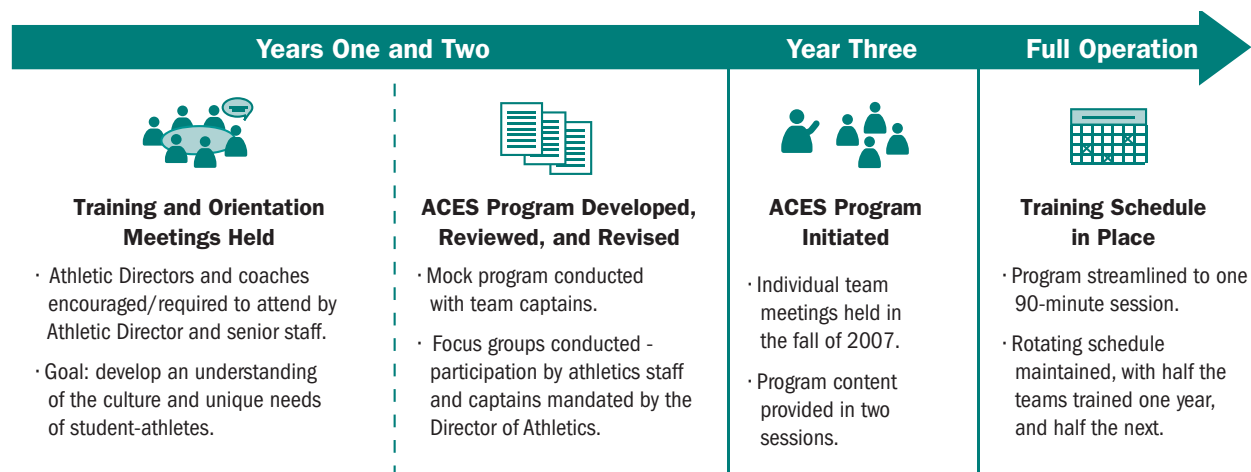
Twenty-five percent of Harvard University students participate in varsity athletics, the largest percentage of any Division I program in the country. Over the years, Harvard administrators had observed that student-athletes accounted for 50% of the alcohol-related emergencies on campus and ultimately were two times more likely to be seen for an alcohol violation than non-athletes.

In 2005, Harvard received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to create ACES (Alcohol Communication and Education Skills) for Athletes, a program developed by Harvard’s director of alcohol and other drug services, Ryan Travia.

## Building Relationships with Athletes Personnel

During the first two years of the program’s development, Travia and his staff worked exclusively with coaches, trainers, and team captains to build key relationships within the athletic department and receive feedback on the program. They gained initial buy-in from the athletics staff, including the Athletic Director and senior staff of assistant and associate athletic directors, by framing ACES for Athletes as a “pilot” program, with clear start and end dates. As a result of Travia communicating a specific time commitment, the coaches were less resistant and ultimately more engaged in the program’s development.

**Figure 5: ACES Program Development Timeline**



## Adjusting the Program Design to Accommodate Busy Schedules

In its original format, the program content was split between two sessions. ACES I was more didactic in nature, focusing on such topics as the physiology of alcohol and risk and protective factors. ACES II incorporated a motivational interviewing approach and, ultimately, an application of the material learned in ACES I.

Over the years, the program has become more streamlined and is now a single 90-minute session. The revised program seeks to increase participants' knowledge of alcohol dosage and BAC, the physiology of alcohol, alcohol's impact on athletic and academic performance, and harm reduction and bystander intervention strategies. Program facilitators use clickers for opinion-type questions to make the sessions interactive.

## Monitoring Outcomes and Refining the Program

Beyond the intervention itself, the program's development and implementation process also yielded meaningful results. According to Travia, "This is a process that we continue to refine every year, adjusting and learning from our mistakes. More than the impact of the program, we've gained so much valuable insight into the nuances of working with this population."

After one year of implementing the ACES for Athletes program, the percentage of student-athletes involved in alcohol-related emergencies declined significantly, from 50% to 20%. Additionally, in 2011, the baseline and post-intervention surveys (administered 11 to 20 weeks after the program) showed that 10% of participants reported drinking less after ACES, while 35% reported drinking with greater caution.

### Lessons Learned at Harvard

**Relationships matter.** Student-athletes viewed the head coach as more of a disciplinarian, and had more of a sibling relationship with the assistant coach. It was the athletic trainers who had the insight – e.g., knew when students had been out partying – and were receptive to intervening.

**Identify assumptions.** Athletes indicated they were more likely to call for help for a friend or stranger than for a teammate due to concern about the coach's response. Therefore, it was important that the program include "myth-busting" to clarify policy.

**Test prevention strategies against your population.** Social norms didn't translate to the athlete population. Students knew each other too well, so there were no discrepancies between perception and reality; teaching protective strategies was a more effective approach.

## Continued Success at Harvard

In 2012, the baseline and post-intervention surveys (administered 14-18 weeks after the program) showed a significant reduction in the quantity of drinks by athletes who were "in season" and 42% of participants reported drinking with greater caution. Additionally, Harvard has observed a further reduction in athletes admitted to a medical facility for alcohol intoxication, with that population now representing just 12% of total admissions.



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# Developing a Game Plan for Reaching Student-Athletes

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Based on the research literature and the experiences of campus officials, we encourage institutions to follow these guidelines for addressing problems due to student-athletes' alcohol use:

- 1 Assemble a task force to develop an integrated approach.** While the Athletics Department will want to deploy its own prevention strategies, these efforts should not operate in isolation, but as part of an integrated plan that involves student affairs, residential life, student conduct, and other key administrative departments.
- 2 Work with coaches, trainers, and team captains to learn about their concerns and priorities.** Athletics Department staff will be more likely to stay engaged on this issue if they see that other campus officials understand and can accommodate the time demands placed on student-athletes and the pressures they can experience as “campus celebrities.”
- 3 Understand what makes student-athletes unique.** Student-athletes' drinking motives, patterns of alcohol use, and alcohol-related consequences all differ in important ways from those of other college students, which can present unique challenges when working with this population.
- 4 Collaborate with other campuses.** When colleges and universities that are part of the same NCAA conference develop a coordinated approach, this can send a strong signal to student-athletes and thereby reinforce each institution's individual prevention efforts.
- 5 Develop a comprehensive plan.** Successful prevention requires a consistent, year-long effort and a mix of approaches that work at the individual student level while also seeking to change the social and policy environment that influences students' alcohol use.
- 6 Communicate the institution's expectations regarding student-athletes' conduct.** Student-athletes should be told that they will be held to the highest standards of behavior, and that high-risk drinking and unruly behavior will not be tolerated.
- 7 Evaluate your program and share your campus experience.** Campus administrators can learn about effective strategies by sharing insights and program evaluations with one another.

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# Conclusion

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Having an intercollegiate athletics program can play an important role in student development and in building a sense of community, but it can also contribute to a campus environment where heavy or even dangerous drinking is widely accepted as a normal part of student life. Unfortunately, athletes themselves are among the students who are at greatest risk to drink heavily and experience negative alcohol-related consequences. In response, several colleges have begun to develop and evaluate programs designed to address alcohol use among student-athletes, including orientation sessions, online education, brief interventions, and social norms approaches. By employing these programs, putting a greater emphasis on implementing and enforcing appropriate policies, and through careful and thoughtful collaboration and relationship building, campus officials can help athletes reach their full potential, as both students and athletes.

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# Additional Resources

 	<p><b>WHAT</b> Strategic planning conference focused on substance abuse prevention and health promotion for student-athletes</p> <p><b>WHO</b> "Prevention teams" of 4-6 members from a given institution (student athletes, coaches, administrators and health educators)</p> <p><b>PURPOSE</b> Teams create an institution-specific action plan; APPLE staff tracks progress at 3 and 9 months.</p> <p><b>+ INFO</b> <a href="http://www.virginia.edu/gordiecenter/apple">www.virginia.edu/gordiecenter/apple</a></p>
	<p><b>WHAT</b> NCAA-sponsored grant for 3-year projects; institutions receive up to \$30,000</p> <p><b>WHO</b> Application can be completed by any campus professional; Campus project coordinators collaborate with athletics, student-affairs (and sometimes academic affairs!)</p> <p><b>PURPOSE</b> Integrate student-athletes and athletics into campus-wide prevention efforts</p> <p><b>+ INFO</b> <a href="http://www.ncaa.org/CHOICES">www.ncaa.org/CHOICES</a> (How to write a CHOICES Grant Proposal, Best of CHOICES and IMPACT Evaluation Resource)</p>
 <p><b>National Center for Drug Free Sport, Inc.®</b></p>	<p><b>WHAT</b> Provider of sport drug testing, drug screening policies, and drug education programs, including:</p> <div data-bbox="618 1129 1453 1283" style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;">  <p>Resource Exchange Center - current information on dietary supplements and banned substances.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="618 1297 1453 1381" style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;">  <p>Web-based drug education tutorial created specifically for student-athletes</p> </div>
 	<p><b>WHAT</b> Partnership between NCAA and NASPA to develop a prevention initiative targeting Division III schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary resource is a web portal with a supplemental training and implementation program, and featuring a Personalized Feedback Intervention tool for athletes.</li> <li>• Currently being piloted at 23 Division III schools, with full program implementation expected to take place in the fall of 2014.</li> </ul> <p><b>+ INFO</b> To learn more about this project and to find out if your campus is participating in the pilot program, go to: <a href="#">NASPA and NCAA Division III Partnership</a></p>