



## PREVENTION WITH PURPOSE:

# A Resource for Preventing Substance Use Among Student-Athletes

Intercollegiate athletics is an important part of campus life in the United States. In 2022, over 600,000 student-athletes<sup>1,2</sup> represented their schools in sports, ranging from football to softball to track and field. With the extensive practice and travel commitments required by intercollegiate play, these students must work hard to balance the high demands of athletics, and the other demands faced by college students. Being part of a team, they learn lessons that are valuable far beyond the playing field, including leadership, sacrifice, and commitment.

The discipline, routine, and healthy habits required to train and compete at a high level can deter student-athletes from using substances. But being a college athlete has its share of challenges, too. Injuries happen. An athlete may get less playing time than they were expecting. The stress of competing at a high level can become too much. If left unexamined, these experiences can all contribute to substance use.

Campus-based prevention staff can play a significant role in ensuring that student-athletes do not turn to substance use when the going gets tough. Interviews with athletic department staff from multiple colleges and universities, as well as prevention practitioners, provide insight into the reasons why student-athletes use substances—and how the experiences of student-athletes are fundamentally different than their peers who do not play competitive sports.

## SUBSTANCE USE AMONG STUDENT-ATHLETES

Recent research from the National Collegiate Athletic Association<sup>3</sup> has shown that use of some substances among student-athletes has been on the decline for over a decade. Notably:

- » Rates of alcohol use among student-athletes have fallen from 83% in 2009 to 72% in 2023.
- » Rates of binge drinking among student-athletes have fallen from 55% in 2009 to 35% in 2023.
- » Rates of prescription narcotics use among student-athletes have fallen from 18% in 2013 to 5.6% in 2023.

However, there is still work to do. NCAA<sup>4</sup> also found:

- » Rates of marijuana use among female student-athletes have increased from 18.4% in 2009 to 24.9% in 2023.
- » Rates of vape or e-cigarette use to consume tobacco or nicotine among student-athletes have increased from 8.3% in 2017 to 22.1% in 2023.

Alcohol and substance use varies by gender, sport, and season. One consistent finding, however, is that student-athletes estimate higher levels of alcohol use among their athlete peers than what actually occurs.<sup>5</sup>

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

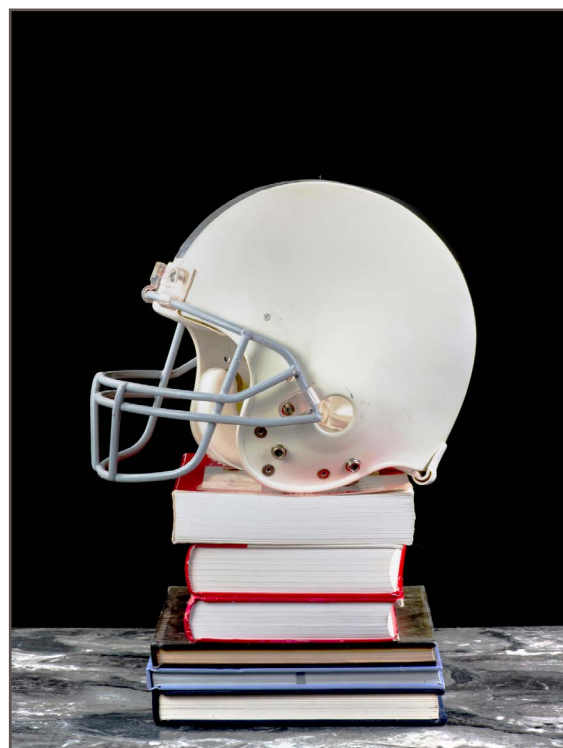
Student-athletes face significant pressure to perform on the field and in the classroom. However, they also have supports—including teammates, coaches, trainers, and other key athletic department staff—to help them get through difficult times. Understanding this blend of risk and protective factors is key to preventing substance misuse among student-athletes.

Risk factors for substance use among student-athletes include the following:

- » **Stress:** Balancing academics and athletics can be challenging. Students who feel that stress may use substances as a coping mechanism.
- » **Team identity:** Some teams may have traditions or rituals around substance use that are intended to build team culture. Student-athletes who otherwise do not use



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substances may choose to participate in these behaviors to fit in and be accepted. It is easy for new student-athletes to perceive substance use as the norm on their team based on the messages communicated by key team leaders and coaches.

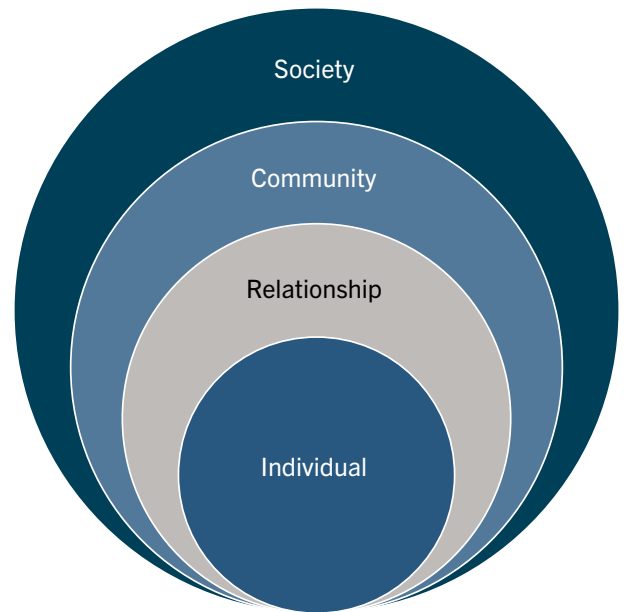
- » **End of season:** For some student-athletes, the end of a season will offer a break in their demanding training schedules. This break may lead to less restraint and greater risk-taking leading to substance use. For other student-athletes, the end of the season may signal the end of their athletic career. This might lead to feelings of insecurity, sadness, and anxiety, which may prompt substance use.

Protective factors against substance use among student-athletes include:

- » **Individual identity as an athlete:** If a student-athlete believes that alcohol and other drugs will prevent them from achieving their athletic goals, they will be less inclined to use substances.
- » **Team identity:** Athletes who are part of a team are part of something larger than themselves. Athletes' feelings of connection and responsibility to their coaches, teammates, and fans can be a protective factor against substance use. This added layer of connection provides support and a sense of belonging.
- » **Structure during the season:** Between practices, classes, and travel for games, the life of an intercollegiate athlete is highly structured—leaving little downtime for substance use.

The socio-ecological model of health provides a framework for the domains of influence in our lives. For student-athletes, the relationship and community domains can contain multiple layers, including the sport they play, the team they are on, and the athletic department that supports them. These domains can provide both risk and protective factors for student-athletes.

Identifying and understanding the risk and protective factors facing student-athletes is key to designing programs that allow them to thrive. This document presents some strategies for building campus-based prevention programs that are effective and that build on the support structures that student-athletes have in place.



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## USING THE STRATEGIC PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

**Assessment:** Gather data on student-athletes' substance use patterns and risk and protective factors. Conduct surveys of individual teams and sports to better understand the scope of substance use among different communities.

**Capacity building:** Work with coaches, team leaders, trainers, and other key leaders in athletics to become advocates for, and partners in, prevention.

**Strategic planning:** Develop programs and interventions that address identified risk and protective factors for student-athletes. Invite athletes to be a part of your planning process. Collaborate with athletic staff to integrate prevention into health and wellness trainings.

**Implementation:** Adapt campus-wide campaigns, strategies, and interventions for student-athletes. Collaborate with athletic staff and individual teams to implement prevention strategies and education efforts.

**Evaluation:** Collect data on implementation efforts. Use those data to shape programmatic improvements.



## GET TO KNOW THE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT

To work with and support student-athletes, prevention providers need to understand the landscape of athletics on campus. Learn the leadership structure, staffing, and divisions of the athletic department. Administrators, coaches, and others within the athletic department can all be partners in your prevention work.

### Learn About What Supports Are Already in Place

Student-athletes already have a number of supports in place on campus. Prevention practitioners looking to work with student-athletes should become familiar with those existing supports. Connecting with the athletic department is often a great place to start.

Because of the demands of physical competition, intercollegiate student-athletes often have special access to athletic trainers and health and fitness resources beyond what is available to other students. Depending on your campus, they may also have special accommodations for lodging, meals, and academic services.

At some larger institutions, student-athletes can access mental health resources more easily and more quickly than the general student population. Other resources regularly offered to student-athletes include tutoring, time management support, and access to sports psychologists.

Learning about what supports are already in place for student-athletes on your campus can provide insights into potential partnerships, opportunities, and needs.

## Meet the People Who Work Directly with Student-Athletes

Staff who work directly with athletes are a tremendous resource for prevention practitioners. Athletic department staff often know individual athletes well and understand the nuances in culture among different teams. The athletic director on your campus is ultimately responsible for all athletic programming. However, multiple people interviewed for this publication recommended getting to know athletic staff who work more closely with athletes on a day-to-day basis.



At the intercollegiate level, head coaches are in charge of managing a coaching staff and an entire team. However, assistant coaches do a lot of the day-to-day instructional work, giving them an opportunity to get to know individual players well. This familiarity can make them effective partners in prevention.

Athletic trainers have a unique position supporting teams and student-athletes. They provide necessary rehab sessions with athletes and are close to the team on a daily basis. Because student-athletes tend to talk with each other openly in training rooms, athletic trainers get to know the athletes and the team norms or perceived norms. Trainers are well-positioned to provide prevention education as part of the information and education they already provide to students on their overall health.

## Understand the Athletic Seasons and Schedules

Prevention staff should also know that the calendar looks different for student-athletes than it does for nonathletes. When mapping out times of heightened substance use risk for students, prevention professionals may think about events such as Halloween, spring break, and 21st birthday celebrations. But student-athletes have added risks, too. One might be an end-of-season party, where student-athletes may choose to let loose after having taken care of their bodies all season. It is key to know the schedule and competition seasons for various sports on campus to make sure these times are considered.

## LEARN ABOUT THE STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

Student-athletes are only competing a fraction of the time they are on campus. The rest of the time they are training, going to class, doing homework, and hanging out with peers. In other words, they are college students who happen to be very skilled at a particular sport. Prevention practitioners should take steps to learn about the experiences, norms, and pressures of being a student-athlete as they build prevention programming.

## Talk to Student-Athletes

The best way to learn about the student-athlete experience is to talk to the student-athletes themselves. Ask them why their sport matters to them, what goals they have for the athletic season and academic year, and what perceptions they have about substance use in their sport. Consider that student-athletes' reasons for substance use may be different from other students on campus. Student-athletes experience greater time and performance pressures than their nonathlete peers. One NCAA study<sup>6</sup> found that an athlete's performance ranked behind academics as self-identified stressors.

In addition to talking to student-athletes, some institutions may even have health datasets that contain information about student-athletes and their substance use behaviors. Check with your school's administration about the availability of such health data. You may even be able to review data by student-athletes as a subpopulation, which would provide some population-level data about the challenges (and opportunities) faced by student-athletes on your campus.

Consider also conducting focus groups or interviews with student-athlete leaders, former athletes, coaches, trainers, and others to understand the programs, culture, and supports at your school. Not all athletes will have had the same experiences—so it's important to interview student-athletes from a variety of teams.

As you conduct focus groups and interviews, try to avoid playing into stereotypes or biases about student-athletes as a whole, such as assumptions about student athletes' commitment to academics or use of alcohol and other drugs. Athletes are individuals. Each sport or team is unique. Understanding those differences can be the key to understanding how to ensure prevention messages and services reach the student-athletes on your campus.

## Identify the Most Important Voices on a Team

Team leaders are often the ones establishing, maintaining, and enforcing team norms and traditions. One way to begin to shift team norms around substance use is to involve those team leaders in prevention efforts.

Both team and individual sports are built around the concept of a unified group. Team leaders—whether formal team captains or experienced players who command respect among team members—can have an outsized impact on the rest of the group. Identifying those key players and providing education and training as peer educators and leaders can go a long way to help shift the norms or perceived norms on the team.



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## Learn About Drug-Testing Requirements

All intercollegiate athletes are subject to the drug use policies of their sport's sanctioning body. Athletic directors, coaches, and trainers are also expected to understand and comply with the rules. Failure to adhere to these policies may result in a student-athlete's loss of eligibility to compete at the collegiate level.

Prevention staff should become familiar with the specific drug policies and drug-testing programs in place for their student-athletes. These may include policies from NCAA,<sup>7</sup> NAIA,<sup>8</sup> or NJCAA, depending on your school.



## DIVE INTO TEAM CULTURE

Every team has its own identity and culture, both built by and adhered to by players. On some teams, team culture can be a protective factor against substance use. On other teams, it can be the opposite.

### Examine Team Culture and Group Dynamics

Individuals who are part of a team are more likely to conform to the perceived norms of the group, especially when players identify strongly with that team. Team members who believe their part of the team identity involves alcohol and other drug use are more likely to engage in that behavior themselves. This can be true even if there isn't overt pressure from team leadership to drink or use drugs.<sup>9</sup>

Athletic teams are often environments with student-athletes of different ages. In these settings, peer pressure and alcohol can have dangerous consequences. Team culture may also include adhering to traditions that have been passed down from season to season. While there is nothing inherently dangerous about athletic traditions, many of them in collegiate athletics revolve around alcohol or other drug use. Prevention providers can work with team leaders to reconfigure traditions so they revolve less around substance use but are still in line with the team's traditions.

### Examine Pressures and Challenges

It's hard to talk about the student-athlete experience without talking about pressure—pressure to perform, pressure to play, pressure to win. Some athletes shine brightest when the pressure is most intense. Others struggle with it and look for other ways to cope. The pressure to play can sometimes push student-athletes to ignore injuries or to play through significant pain. Playing through pain can put student-athletes at risk for opioid misuse and, increasingly, marijuana use.



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Yet while many athletes will recover from their injury and take the field again, some will not. Student-athletes who confront these career-ending injuries are thrust into a new reality. Who are they if not an athlete?

These life shifts can be disorienting. And they don't always come as a result of an injury. Many intercollegiate student-athletes are at the end of their competitive athletic careers simply because there is no next step for them. As they approach the end of their collegiate career, many student-athletes have to confront the reality that one chapter of their life is ending. Substance use may be one way student-athletes cope with change and uncertainty.

## DEVELOP PARTNERS IN PREVENTION

Since so much of a student-athlete's collegiate experience happens alongside teammates and coaches, it is important for campus substance use prevention providers to develop partnerships with these groups. Doing so will increase the reach of your campus's prevention programming. It may also help prevention providers better understand the contexts in which student-athletes live, learn, and play, leading to more effective prevention programming.

### Engage Athletic Staff in Existing Prevention Programs

Sometimes, an existing substance use prevention program just needs the right ambassadors to reach an audience of student-athletes. Consider the programs that your campus already has in place—and then identify people in the athletic department (such as trainers, mental health staff, team doctors, or assistant coaches) who can support your efforts.

## TAKE ACTION

Ready to make a difference on your campus? Here is how to build programs and interventions that will make a difference.

1. **Increase your understanding:** Gather information and develop an understanding of student-athletes' unique risk and protective factors. This information will inform all the prevention work you do with student-athletes and the athletic department.
2. **Build capacity:** Educate coaches, trainers, and athletes about prevention, prevention resources, and ways to build protective factors among student-athletes.
3. **Develop partnerships:** Connect with individuals working within the athletic department and with those who work regularly with student-athletes. They will make great partners in your prevention work.
4. **Plan together:** Invite athletic department representatives to be a part of your strategic planning process and provide support to the strategic planning conducted by the athletic department.





## CONCLUSION

The lessons are clear. By working with the athletic department, developing partnerships, and listening to student-athletes share their own stories of success and failure, campus prevention staff can build a culture of prevention both on and off the field.

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## Endnotes

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## Copies of this Publication Are Available Online

Copies of this publication are available online at [www.campusdrugprevention.gov](http://www.campusdrugprevention.gov), DEA's website for professionals working to prevent drug misuse among college students.



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