

From Student Athletes to Student Success

Why Higher Education Should Bring Mental Fitness to the Whole Campus

A white paper from The MBA Experiment | Kevin Thibodeaux | October 2026

Executive Summary

Higher education already accepts a simple truth in athletics. Preparation alone does not guarantee performance. Student athletes need skill, conditioning, feedback, repetition, recovery, confidence, and mental performance support so they can execute when pressure rises. The same truth applies across the broader student experience.

Students are navigating academic demands, career uncertainty, AI disruption, social comparison, financial pressure, identity formation, and rising expectations from employers and institutions. Many have access to advising, tutoring, counseling, career services, leadership programs, and wellbeing resources. Yet access to support does not automatically create the inner capacity to use that support well.

This is the student success gap. It is the space between preparation and performance. A student can know what to do and still freeze in an interview. A student can receive feedback and experience it as failure. A student can have career advice and still avoid the next step. A student can understand responsible AI use and still rely on shortcuts when confidence drops or pressure rises.

Mental fitness addresses that gap. It is not therapy, and it is not a replacement for counseling or clinical care. It is a practical readiness capacity that helps students regulate, recover, focus, choose, communicate, and act effectively under pressure. Like any real skill, it develops through practice. Students do not build resilience, confidence, or judgment by hearing about them once. They build them through repeated moments of awareness, reset, reflection, and action.

The opportunity for higher education is to bring the mental performance logic of athletics into student success, career readiness, leadership development, advising, coaching, AI literacy, and professional education. Mental fitness should not be reserved for student athletes. It should become part of how institutions prepare students to learn, lead, adapt, and thrive.

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The Core Insight From Athletics

Athletics gives higher education a clear model for human performance. Coaches understand that skill and knowledge are necessary but incomplete. Athletes must also learn how to perform when the crowd is loud, the clock is short, the opponent is strong, and the outcome matters.

That is why strong athletic programs invest in mindset, confidence, focus, resilience, recovery, visualization, team culture, leadership, and the ability to reset after mistakes. They also build practice environments where those capacities are repeated until they become usable under pressure.

A coach would rarely say, “The athlete knows the playbook, so mindset does not matter.” Knowing the playbook is not the same as executing under pressure. Physical ability is not the same as competitive resilience. And more explanation is not the same as practice.

The point is not to turn every student into an athlete. The point is to recognize that all students face moments where knowledge, skill, and opportunity must be supported by mindset, resilience, and performance habits. The exam room, interview room, presentation stage, internship, group project, leadership role, clinical placement, and first job all create pressure that exposes whether preparation can become action.

Athletics also shows that performance support does not need to wait until something is broken. The best programs do not train mindset only after an athlete collapses under pressure. They build habits in advance through repetition, feedback, reflection, and recovery. Higher education can apply the same logic to the broader student population.

This is where the coaching analogy matters. Coaches do not simply tell athletes to be resilient. They create reps. They pause after mistakes, review what happened, reset attention, and send the athlete back into practice. A campus mental fitness strategy should work the same way. It should not be a one-time talk, but repeated practice embedded into the places students already prepare for pressure.

Why This Matters Now

The pressure on students is changing, and the supports around them must change with it. Student success, persistence, career readiness, wellbeing, belonging, responsible AI use, and the value of college are no longer separate conversations. They increasingly point to the same question. Can students use what they know when the environment becomes uncertain, demanding, or emotionally charged?

Recent student surveys continue to show that stress and mental health affect academic performance for a meaningful portion of students. Inside Higher Ed and Generation Lab reported that two in five students say stress or mental health is impacting their academics a great deal. That finding does not mean every student

needs clinical care. It does mean pressure is interfering with learning, follow-through, and performance for many students.

At the same time, employers continue to emphasize applied readiness. NACE's 2026 employer research identifies communication, teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking as among the most important career readiness skills for new graduates. These are not only technical competencies. They require self-command, confidence, discernment, emotional regulation, and the ability to work with others under pressure.

Institutions are also under financial and reputational pressure to show value. National Student Clearinghouse data show that roughly three quarters of first-time students persist to the second fall, and a smaller share remain at their original institution. Even small improvements in persistence, confidence, engagement, and career readiness can matter to students and to schools.

AI adds another layer. Students now have powerful tools that can accelerate learning or weaken it, depending on how they are used. Responsible AI use requires more than tool training. Students need discernment, self-trust, agency, ethical judgment, and the ability to stay engaged when technology makes avoidance easier.

What an Early VCU Pilot Suggests

The case for practice is also supported by early institutional evidence. In a VCU School of Business pilot, students practiced mental fitness through a Positive Intelligence-based approach and completed aggregate measures of confidence, resilience, follow-through, and related readiness capacities. The pilot was designed as a practical learning experience, not as a controlled clinical study.

Among the 14 active participants who completed the endpoint survey, 13 reported greater confidence managing academic or work demands, 13 felt more prepared to succeed at work, and all 14 reported stronger follow-through under pressure. Eleven reported using resilience tools often or consistently in the previous seven days. These findings are promising preliminary evidence, not definitive proof, but they illustrate the kind of practical shift institutions can measure when mental fitness is treated as a practice rather than a message.

The Student Success Gap

Higher education has built important support systems around students, including academic advising, tutoring, counseling, wellness programming, career services, leadership development, belonging initiatives, and AI literacy resources. These supports matter. The problem is that many students still struggle to convert support into action.

Students may know help is available and still avoid asking for it. They may understand a career recommendation but hesitate to follow through. They may receive feedback and personalize it as failure. They may join a leadership program but struggle to speak up. They may have access to AI tools but use them to bypass discomfort rather than deepen learning.

This gap is especially visible in professional and graduate education. MBA and business students are preparing for roles that require judgment, influence, collaboration, executive presence, ethical decision

making, and decision making under uncertainty. These are performance capacities, not only academic outcomes.

The same pattern appears across the broader student population. Students are not only preparing to pass courses. They are preparing for workplaces and communities that require adaptability, emotional intelligence, communication, resilience, and responsible action.

Institutions can no longer assume that academic preparation automatically produces readiness. Student success now requires helping students build the internal capacity to use what they know.

Practice, Not More Content

Mental fitness is the practical capacity to stay grounded, adaptable, and self-directed under pressure. The important word is practical. This is not another topic for students to understand intellectually. It is a set of habits students can practice until they become more available in the moments that matter.

The VCU pilot used Positive Intelligence-based practices as one method for developing these capacities. The broader institutional case is not tied to one branded method. It is the case for giving students structured, repeated opportunities to notice pressure, reset, reflect, and act.

Five capacities matter most for student success, and each one can be practiced.

1. **Self-command** helps students pause, regulate, and choose intentionally rather than react automatically to stress, fear, comparison, or uncertainty.
2. **Confidence** helps students trust themselves enough to act, learn, recover, and try again without needing perfect outcomes.
3. **Resilience** helps students recover from setbacks, feedback, disappointment, and ambiguity without losing agency.
4. **Discernment** helps students make thoughtful choices when advice, expectations, technology, values, and uncertainty compete for attention.
5. **Leadership presence** helps students communicate, relate, and act with steadiness when others are looking for trust, direction, or confidence.

Together, these capacities help students translate preparation into performance. They help students move from reaction to choice, hesitation to action, setback to growth, confusion to clarity, and isolation to connection. That shift rarely happens because a student heard a better lecture. It happens because the student has practiced the reset, the reflection, the next step, and the recovery enough times to use them when pressure rises.

Mental fitness should therefore be understood as a readiness layer. It does not replace academic preparation, counseling, advising, career services, or leadership programs. It helps those investments work better because students become more able to use them. The work is not to give students more content. The work is to help them practice the internal capacity that lets existing content, coaching, and support turn into action.

Why This Matters to Schools

Mental fitness matters because it connects to things schools already care about. It should not be framed only as wellness. Wellness matters, but this work also affects persistence, confidence, career readiness, leadership, belonging, and responsible AI use.

Student Success and Persistence

Students who lack confidence, resilience, or self-command may disengage even when resources are available. They may avoid asking for help, interpret setbacks as proof they do not belong, or withdraw before an institution can intervene. Mental fitness gives students a practical way to stay engaged through normal friction.

Career Readiness

Career readiness is not only resume quality or interview preparation. It is the ability to communicate value, handle uncertainty, receive feedback, collaborate, adapt, and perform when stakes rise. These are exactly the moments where mental fitness becomes visible.

Leadership Development

Leadership programs often focus on skills, roles, models, and experiences. Mental fitness adds the internal layer of how students manage themselves while leading others. Students who can regulate, listen, recover, and choose intentionally are better prepared to lead in ambiguity.

Belonging and Confidence

Belonging is not only about whether students are welcomed. It is also about whether they can internalize belonging and participate with confidence. Mental fitness helps students work with self-doubt, comparison, and fear of judgment so they can engage more fully.

Responsible AI Use

AI has made self-trust more important, not less. Students need to know when to use AI, when to rely on their own thinking, when to ask better questions, and when technology may be helping them avoid the very struggle that builds capability.

A Clearer Promise to Students

Schools are under pressure to show students, families, employers, and partners what their education actually prepares students to do. Helping students build confidence, resilience, adaptability, and leadership presence gives that promise more substance.

The School Business Case

The case for mental fitness gets stronger when it connects to work schools already measure and fund. This is not another standalone student support program. It is a practical way to help advising, career services, leadership development, student success, AI literacy, and professional preparation work better.

The case is straightforward.

1. **Retention and persistence.** If mental fitness helps even a small number of students stay engaged through pressure, feedback, uncertainty, or transition, the impact can show up in persistence and net tuition protection.
2. **Career outcomes.** If students communicate more confidently, recover from rejection, follow through on networking, and perform better in interviews or internships, career services and employer relations become more effective.
3. **Clearer student promise.** A school that helps students build human readiness can tell a clearer story to prospective students, parents, alumni, employers, and partners.
4. **Better support across campus.** Advisors, coaches, faculty, and career teams can use the same simple language to reinforce confidence, recovery, agency, and follow-through without adding another program for students to manage.

The financial math does not need to be complicated. If a program has 500 students and net tuition revenue of \$30,000 per student, retaining five additional students protects roughly \$150,000 in annual tuition revenue. If a focused mental fitness pilot helps improve engagement, persistence, career readiness, or student confidence, the question is not whether the program is a cost. The better question is where it strengthens work schools are already funding.

For business schools and professional programs, reputation is part of the case too. Employer confidence, alumni pride, student referrals, and partner interest are shaped by whether graduates show up with readiness, steadiness, and confidence. Mental fitness gives schools a simple language for that promise.

Where Higher Education Can Start

Mental fitness does not need to become one more program competing for attention. It can strengthen work schools are already doing.

A practical starting point is to choose a group where pressure, transition, and readiness are already visible. Examples include MBA students, professional students, student leaders, first generation students, career transition populations, scholarship cohorts, athletic-adjacent leadership groups, or students preparing for internships and full time employment.

From there, institutions can test mental fitness in a low-risk way.

- Run a workshop or short cohort experience focused on practicing confidence, resilience, pressure management, and readiness.
- Integrate short practice prompts and reflection reps into existing career, leadership, advising, coaching, or AI literacy programs.
- Equip staff, advisors, coaches, or faculty with a shared language for self-command, recovery, confidence, agency, and repeated practice.
- Give students simple repeated reps. Notice the pressure, name the reaction, reset, choose the next right action, and reflect on what changed.
- Measure practical shifts in confidence, resilience, readiness, agency, and perceived ability to perform under pressure.
- Use the evidence to decide where mental fitness practice fits best before expanding it.

This approach avoids adding a large new burden to students, faculty, or staff. It strengthens student success and readiness work with the human performance layer those efforts often assume but do not directly practice. It also gives coaches, advisors, faculty, and student affairs leaders a practical way to reinforce the same habits over time.

Leadership Opportunity

Higher education does not need to choose between academic rigor and human development. The institutions that prepare students best will do both.

Students need knowledge, skills, credentials, networks, and opportunities. They also need the inner capacity to use those assets well. That means confidence when the path is uncertain, resilience when progress is uneven, discernment when tools are powerful, and leadership presence when others are counting on them. Those qualities can be developed, but only if students get a real chance to practice them.

For business schools and professional programs, the opportunity is immediate. Employers are not only asking whether graduates know the material. They are asking whether graduates can communicate, collaborate, adapt, lead, and perform when conditions change.

For student affairs and academic leaders, the same idea applies across campus. Mental fitness can connect wellbeing, belonging, persistence, leadership, advising, career development, and AI readiness without turning them into one big program.

The question is whether institutions will prepare students only academically, or whether they will also help students build the mental fitness to use their preparation with confidence, resilience, and purpose.

This paper is written for business-school leaders, student-success and student-affairs teams, career-services leaders, faculty, coaches, and others responsible for helping students turn preparation into performance. A practical first step is a 30-minute conversation about where pressure, transition, and readiness are already visible on campus, and whether a small pilot, embedded practice series, or staff-development experience would be useful.

Every student deserves the chance to build the inner readiness to learn, lead, adapt, and thrive.

Selected References

These references are included for leaders who want to see the evidence base behind the argument.

- **NCAA Mental Health Best Practices**, updated 2024, reinforces that athletics already treats student support as a structured institutional responsibility: <https://www.ncaa.org/what-we-do/health-safety-and-performance/mental-health/best-practices/>
- **Inside Higher Ed and Generation Lab Student Voice** reporting found that two in five college students say stress or mental health is impacting their academics a great deal: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/health-wellness/2024/08/08/improving-college-campus-systems-student-mental>

- **NACE Job Outlook 2026 Spring Update** identifies communication, teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking among the most important career readiness skills for new graduates: <https://naceweb.org/career-readiness/trends-and-predictions/employers-say-new-grads-are-largely-prepared-for-work-with-room-to-improve>
- **National Student Clearinghouse 2026 Persistence and Retention** reporting shows continued first year persistence and retention pressure, with more than 77 percent returning for the second fall and 69.1 percent retained at the original institution: <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/nscblog/new-persistence-and-retention-report-reveals-decade-high-rates/>
- **NACUBO 2025 Tuition Discounting Study** reporting notes that 57.1 percent of surveyed private institutions cited new retention efforts for current students as a strategy to increase net tuition revenue: <https://www.nacubo.org/Press-Releases/2026/Most-Undergraduates-Receive-Grants-at-Private-Colleges-NACUBO-Research-Shows>

About The MBA Experiment

The MBA Experiment helps business schools and professional programs build practical performance capacity so students and professionals can execute under pressure, make stronger decisions, communicate with confidence, recover from setbacks, and transition into leadership with greater readiness.

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