

# Game Changer: Peer Navigation and Suicide Prevention for NCAA Student-Athletes and Staff

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## Call for Action

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among NCAA student-athletes and rates are increasing.
- Student-athletes face unique stressors that make them at risk for suicidal behaviors.
- The increasing recognition of this issue has underscored the necessity for tailored suicide prevention initiatives aimed at the athletic community.

## Definitions

- Gatekeepers can help prevent suicide by identifying and connecting with at-risk individuals.
- Peer navigators are non-professional volunteers who offer reflective listening, empathy, and education on mental health and suicide prevention while providing navigation assistance.
- VitalCog<sup>®</sup>: Suicide Prevention is a two-hour evidence-based gatekeeper training course designed originally for the workplace and adapted for student-athletes and athletic staff.
- Joiner's Interpersonal Theory suggests that feelings of thwarted belongingness, burdensomeness, and hopelessness increase suicide risk.

## Project Description & Methods

NCAA school Western Illinois University (WIU) partnered with the University of Colorado Johnson Depression Center to develop and pilot the VitalCog<sup>®</sup>: Suicide Prevention Navigator (VC SPN) program, an integrated gatekeeper suicide prevention training and peer navigator program for student-athletes and athletic staff.

Student-athlete and athletic staff volunteer Peer Navigators were trained to deliver VitalCog<sup>®</sup> training to their athletic peers independently.

Student-athlete Peer Navigators participated in a 3-hour training program to equip them for their role.

Student-athlete Peer Navigators and athletic staff volunteers participated in a 3-hour VitalCog Train-the-Trainer program to become certified suicide prevention trainers.

Peer Navigators independently delivered VitalCog<sup>®</sup> training with support from WIU clinical, administrative, and athletic staff as needed.

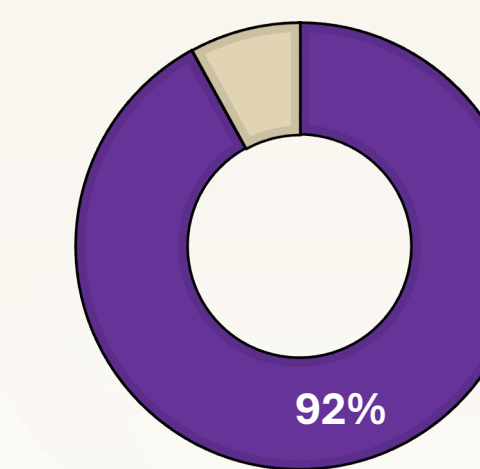
Peer Navigators attended monthly meetings and received support from WIU clinical staff as needed to address concerns, offer advice, share resources, foster cohesion, and promote awareness activities.



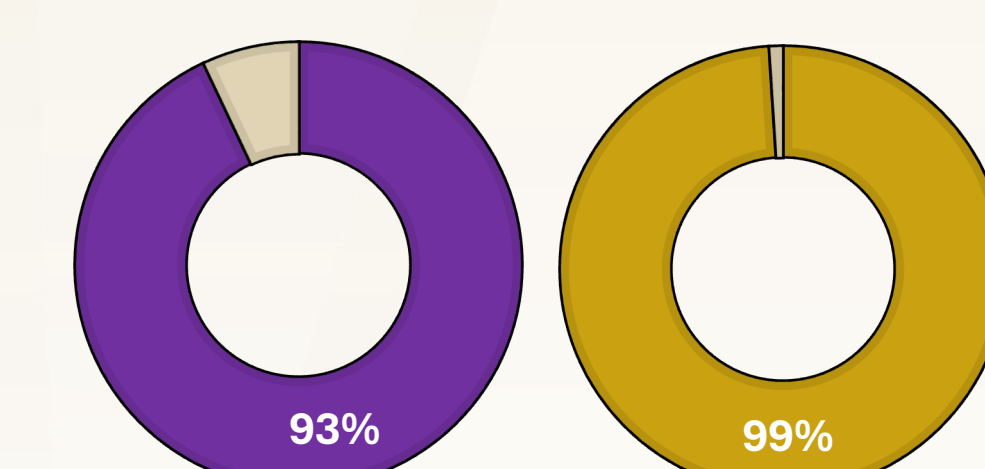
## Program Outcomes



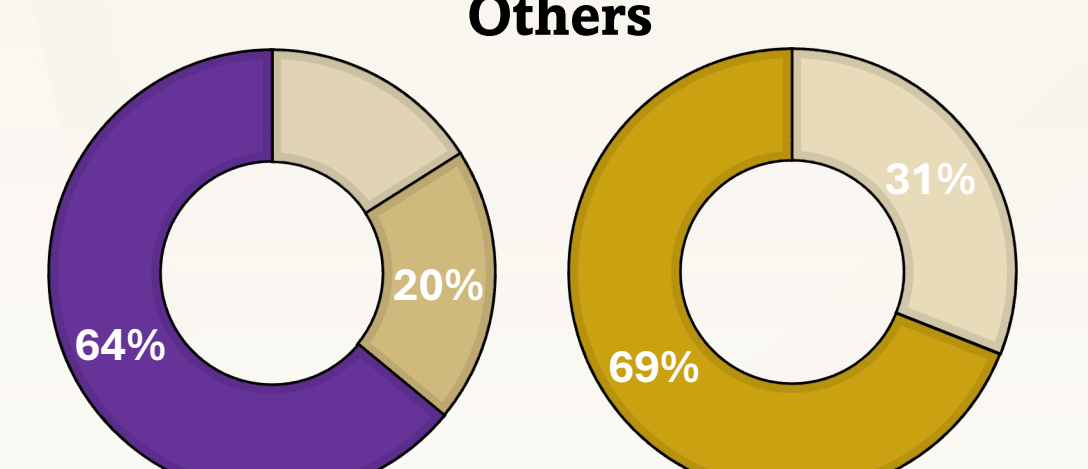
92% Felt SPN Program Was Effective



93% & 99% Felt Train-the-Trainer Program Was Effective



84% & 100% Prepared/Very Prepared to Train Others



"Be direct, Suicide prevention matters."

"Be direct. Stay consistent."

"How to know and respond to suicide symptoms."

"How to help someone... how to be effective."

Theme 1: 51% of student-athletes who attended VitalCog<sup>®</sup> reported that discussing suicide directly was the top thing they learned.

Theme 2: 38% of student-athletes who attended VitalCog<sup>®</sup> training reported that how to recognize signs was the top thing they learned.

"Resources I can offer... Having the right attitude"

"How it's important to know resources for others and yourself."

"How to empathetically talk about suicide"

"Letting them [student-athletes] know they are not alone."

Theme 3: 30% of student-athletes who attended VitalCog<sup>®</sup> training reported that identifying and providing suicide prevention resources was the top thing they learned.

Theme 4: 67% of athletic staff who attended VitalCog<sup>®</sup> training reported that how to have direct conversations about suicide with empathy and compassion was the top thing they learned.

### Perceived Self-Knowledge, Confidence, and Comfort among Student-Athletes (N=184)\*

Evaluation Item	Pre	Post**
I can identify what is helpful in supporting people's mental wellbeing	3.84	4.37
I can identify the risk factors and warning signs of suicide	3.82	4.39
I understand a suicide risk model (e.g., The Interpersonal Theory, Joiner, 2005)	3.18	4.35
I can comfortably talk to someone about getting help	3.86	4.25
I know what resources to offer someone who may be thinking about suicide	3.68	4.43
I can talk to someone about suicide and suicide prevention	3.78	4.30
Overall, I am knowledgeable about suicide prevention	3.65	4.38

\*Data includes only responses matched pre- and post-training.  
\*\*All items showed a significant increase pre- to post-training at p<.001

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