

2023 – 2024 Tim Welsh American Swimming Coaches Association
(ASCA) Fellows' Project

Is youth sport participation in America changing?

Understanding competitive youth swimming retention and
recommendations for the future

2023 ASCA Fellows

Mikaela Bagley, Tara Bolivar, Brandon Converse, Jonny Dray, Angie
Fain, and Jody Riskowski

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2022-24 ASCA Fellows Research Summary

The Tim Welsh 2023-24 American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA) project aims to investigate attrition trends across competitive swimming for 9-14-year-olds, to understand what keeps these athletes in the sport, and to provide recommendations and tools for swim organizations to gain further understanding of swim retention at the organization level. John O’Sullivan, author and founder of Changing the Game, which aims to return youth sports to the youth and put the “play” in “play ball”, states, “Youth sports are a microcosm of the challenges, obstacles, and situations our children will face. They are the perfect place to encounter tough teachers and coaches, difficult situations, and events beyond their control. They are a great educational tool” (2013).

Despite the life-shaping goals achieved through youth sports participation, we are losing athletes' and parents' buy-in during the most critical time for developing these long-term goals. According to an American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) report, approximately 70 % of kids drop out of organized sports by age 13, and the so-called “professionalization of youth sports” cannot be understated as a significant factor why (Boreilli, 2024). When looking at media coverage of USA Swimming, most of the focus is on elite-level athletes’ performance, rather than the development of the athletes. Having information on the developmental paths these elite swimmers travel through to get to and maintain those levels is important for the public and young swimmers to understand the process. It also helps the swimmers, parents, coaches, and other stakeholders recognize the commitment required to reach the national level.

Because of the complex nature of understanding retention and attrition in swimming, the ASCA fellows conducted two studies: (1) an online survey and (2) a focus group. The fellows developed an online survey for the coaching community to identify key reasons coaches believe competitive swimmers stay and leave the sport of swimming. Additionally, there were six focus

groups of parents of athletes of 11 to 14 years olds to determine reasons why they have their child in swimming and what aspects of the sport keep them engaged. Although, a triangulated model of data collection is ideal and would include data collection from the young competitive swimmers, this third part of the triangle was not feasible given the time constraints of the year-long project. Instead, the focus group questions were designed to gather feedback from the swimmers through the lens of their parents.

The primary goal is to understand why young swimmers leave the sport and develop resources to tackle the causes of swimmer attrition, in addition to providing recommendations and tools that may help to reduce attrition of competitive swimmers. Through the project we will identify factors contributing to athlete attrition and develop preventative strategies by exploring membership data within USA Swimming, YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), and AAU (Amateur Athletic Union), among other organizations, and to research best practices in other youth sports organizations.

Recommendations include developing a tracking system aimed at swimmers who are not renewing their swim membership for USA Swimming, YMCA, and AAU to enable a deeper data dive that can provide valuable information to clubs, governance organizations, and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to drive decisions. For example, utilizing the parent portal in SWIMS to ask parents and swimmers questions about why they continue or discontinue their participation in the sport, with the responses being shared anonymously with clubs, could be an appropriate approach, and clubs or sport organizations could also tailor an exit survey to their program to help better meet the needs of their swimmers.

ASCA Parent Focus Group and Survey Methods

This cross-sectional, mixed-methods study determined retention rates and influences on attrition and retention in competitive swimming. The American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) approved and supported the study as part of the ASCA Timothy Welsh Fellows Program.

Study Participants

Participants in the study included swim coaches for the online survey and parents who have or have had swimmers in competitive swim teams for the focus groups. The swim coaches were invited to respond to an online survey developed by the study authors. The online survey was available from February to early April 2024 as a Google Survey.

Parents were invited to participate in the study as a part of a focus group panel. For each focus group, the goal was to have between four and 10 participants, with a duration of no more than one hour. There were eight open-ended questions focused on why swimmers stay/leave the sport and what coaches can do to keep them involved. Parents were recruited from programs affiliated with the Fellows and swim meets where the Fellows were coaching. Focus groups occurred between January 2024 and April 2024.

Focus Group Question Purpose and Development

The study authors developed the initial questions for the Focus Group. The focus group questions were initially developed by the ASCA Fellows, and they were piloted with individual interviews of parents in competitive swim programs. After review by parents, they were approved by ASCA. The initial questions for the focus group were similar across all focus groups (Appendix A), with focus group facilitators asking follow-up questions if more information or clarification was needed.

Online Survey Purpose and Development

The online comprehensive survey aimed to gather insights into various aspects of swimmer retention and coaching within the swimming community (Appendix B). It sought to understand the respondents' coaching roles, experience levels, and affiliations with teams, clubs, or organizations operating under different governing bodies and geographical areas. The survey also sought to identify tracking models and exit survey utilization by coaches to understand if and how these tools were used in their programs.

Recognizing the importance of understanding dropout patterns, the survey aimed to

identify the age range at which most participants tend to leave competitive swimming entirely, as this information could help organizations develop targeted strategies to address attrition at different stages of a swimmer's development.

The coaches' survey sought to understand the respondents' opinions on the factors influencing swimmer retention. It asked about who has the most significant impact on swimmer retention, with options including the club, coaches, parents, and sports rules/governance. This insight could help organizations identify potential areas for improvement or collaboration to enhance retention efforts. Conversely, it aimed to identify the top five factors that respondents believe contribute to athletes leaving swimming, including parent support, interest changes, poor communication, lack of progress, schedule conflicts, graduation, lack of competition, physical and mental health, inadequate facilities, coaching quality, costs, and team culture. Understanding these factors could help organizations develop targeted strategies to address specific challenges and enhance the swimming experience.

Overall, the survey aimed to collect comprehensive data on coaching roles, experience levels, governing body affiliations, swimmer retention rates, tracking systems, dropout patterns, factors influencing retention and attrition, exit survey practices, and inter-organizational collaborations within the swimming community. By gathering these insights, the survey sought to provide valuable information to help organizations develop targeted strategies and initiatives to enhance swimmer retention and overall experience within the sport.

Coaches Survey Outreach

Disseminating the ASCA Coaches' Survey required a multifaceted approach, leveraging various communication channels and engaging the collective efforts of the Fellows class. The survey was consistently promoted through ASCA's weekly newsletters, distributed every Wednesday, helping the survey remain visible and top-of-mind for ASCA's extensive network of coaches and members. The Fellows class took an innovative step by creating personalized videos to share the survey on ASCA's social media platforms, including TikTok, Twitter (now

known as X), Facebook, and Instagram. This marked the first time the Fellows class had engaged ASCA's social media following, showcasing their commitment to reaching a broader audience. Building upon this social media outreach, the Fellows class members shared their videos on their pages, leveraging their networks and connections within the swimming community. Furthermore, the survey was actively promoted across at least 20 different coaches' Facebook groups, providing a direct line of communication with coaches and facilitating widespread dissemination.

The Fellows class also recognized the importance of grassroots efforts, encouraging coaches to make personal posts and calls for input within their respective circles. This word-of-mouth approach was particularly crucial, as many swim coaches do not actively engage with social media, and the goal was to reach as diverse a pool of respondents as possible.

Capitalizing on the power of local connections, several Local Swimming Committees (LSCs) played a vital role in sharing the survey with their members. For instance, the Minnesota LSC shared the survey on five separate occasions with its members, demonstrating the commitment of local organizations to support this initiative.

While outreach efforts were made to all LSCs, the decentralized nature of these organizations made it challenging to track whether the survey was disseminated to every LSC's member. To mitigate this, local clubs with ties to the Fellows class members proactively shared the survey on their social media pages, further expanding the reach.

In a creative and innovative approach, one coach even created a QR code for the survey, which was displayed at swim meets attended by the Fellows class members. This on-site promotion ensured that the survey remained visible and accessible to coaches and parents in attendance.

Throughout the dissemination process, the Fellows class recognized the importance of consistent and regular communication. Frequent posts and reminders were made to maintain a steady flow of survey responses, capitalizing on the power of repetition and persistence to

maximize participation.

The success of this survey's dissemination can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of the Fellows class, who leveraged their collective networks, social media presence, and grassroots connections to reach as many coaches, parents, and stakeholders as possible within the swimming community.

Analysis

Qualitative Focus Group Analysis

For the focus groups, eight open-ended questions focused on why swimmers stay or leave the sport and what coaches can do to keep them involved. All responses to the questions were initially reviewed by two study authors (AF, BC) to develop codes associated with recurring themes. The coding analysis in the open-ended questions followed a content-driven, systematic, iterative process of text interpretation and categorization to establish patterns of importance (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). First, the authors independently reviewed the data to identify meaningful descriptions or noteworthy statements related to the research questions.

After meeting to compare preliminary findings and debate interpretations, they developed coding strategies through consensus; themes were subsequently derived from the coded statements to establish the main findings. The reliability of the analysis was strengthened by the diversity of perspectives that functioned as checks and balances in the analytical process and through a post-analysis examination for conflicting or disconfirming evidence (Kuzel & Like, 1991).

Quantitative Survey Analysis

For the online survey, frequencies and percent of respondents were calculated for the survey questions. Respondents were allowed to respond to the questions for each team where they worked. For example, if a respondent coached high school and USA Swimming, they could answer the survey prompts regarding the high school and USA Swimming teams. Responses for the different types of swim programs were combined to maximize the number of

survey responses, and they were also separated with USA Swimming only as the governing body of swimming. For the questions regarding (1) why swimmers stay in the sport, (2) why swimmers leave the sport, and (3) who has the most impact on swimmer retention, there were pre-populated responses the participant could select, as well as a free-text box to write in other options. All responses to the questions on why swimmers stay or leave the sport and who has the most impact on swimmer retention were initially coded by three study authors (MB, JR, TB), with a fourth author (BC) providing a final code to classify the response to the question. The percentage of respondents selecting the coded values is reported for these three questions.

Statistical analyses were performed using R software (R version 4.3.1, 2023-06-16).

Focus Group Results

There were six focus groups conducted through the course of the study. There were X number of participants included in the focus group, for an average of Y number per group (range of participants was M to N per group). From the focus groups, the Fellows were able to identify several key themes on swimmer retention and attrition.

Fostering Fun and Parental Support: Keys to Keeping Kids Engaged in Swimming

Parents and coaches can work together to keep young athletes engaged in the sport by incorporating fun and fostering a supportive environment. A key finding through the focus groups was on the importance of fun with the swim organization.

The Importance of Fun:

Speakers consistently emphasized the importance of keeping swimming enjoyable for young athletes. The mentioned practices incorporate fun activities, build team spirit, and balance competition and play. Here is what some speakers had to say:

- **Engaging Activities:** “Games, relays, themed practices, and dryland exercises can add variety and entertainment to training” (Speaker 7).
- **Social Interaction:** “Having success in the pool and achieving goals like making time cuts... Being able to socialize and spend time with friends at practice”

(Speaker 5) were both cited as crucial factors in enjoyment.

- **Positive Reinforcement:** Positive feedback from coaches is crucial. Speaker 2 mentioned “connecting with and receiving positive encouragement from coaches” as a factor in keeping kids engaged.
- **Goal Setting and Recognition:** Celebrating even small victories can be motivating. Speaker 10 highlighted the importance of the coach's “positive attitudes” that make practices more fun and lead to a more enjoyable experience.

Balancing Competition:

While competition can be motivating, overemphasis can detract from enjoyment.

Focusing on individual improvement and fostering a healthy sportsmanship mindset is crucial:

- “The competitive spirit of racing and trying to improve times” (Speaker 5) can be positive but should be balanced with other fun elements.
- Speaker 4 mentioned their daughter enjoyed swimming but disliked meets, implying some aspects can be less enjoyable. However, Speaker 3 noted that their daughter “loves the meets because she gets to be with friends,” highlighting the importance of the social aspect.

Parental Support: A Foundation for Success

Parental involvement plays a significant role in shaping a child's swimming experience.

Supportive parents can significantly impact their child's motivation and enjoyment of the sport.

Critical aspects of parental support include:

- **Positive Reinforcement:** Encouragement and positive reinforcement go a long way. Parents should focus on effort and personal growth rather than solely on results. As Speaker 2 said, “Parents need to be supportive and encouraging and not belittle their children if they don't achieve certain times.”
- **Communication and Collaboration:** Open communication with coaches and understanding their role is crucial. Parents should avoid coaching their children

themselves and focus on fostering a positive team environment. Speaker 6 emphasized that parents "constantly reinforce going to coaches for feedback rather than the parents themselves."

- **Balancing Expectations:** Parents should help their children prioritize and manage their time effectively. Encouraging participation in other activities can prevent burnout and maintain a healthy balance. Speaker 4 referenced allowing kids to balance swimming with other activities "like birthday parties when they are young" rather than making it an all-consuming focus.
- **Prioritizing Fun:** Parents should ensure swimming remains enjoyable. They should avoid putting undue pressure on their children and focus on fostering a love for the sport. Speaker 5 highlighted that they ask their daughter "if she had fun after meets" rather than focusing on times.
- **Creating a Support System:** Participating in team activities and fostering connections with other parents can build a stronger team community and a more enjoyable experience for everyone. Speaker 4 referenced fostering relationships outside the water through social activities planned by parent reps, which helps kids feel like part of a team.

The Coach: A Positive Force in Keeping Swimmers Engaged

The previous sections explored young swimmers' challenges and the importance of fostering enjoyment through fun and parental support. This section highlights coaches' critical role in keeping swimmers engaged in the sport by addressing these challenges and creating a positive and motivating environment.

- **Positive Coaching: Building Skills and Confidence** Speakers consistently emphasized the positive impact of coaches prioritizing skill development, personalized attention, and creating a supportive team environment (Speakers 2, 3, and 4). This is evident in the following examples:

- **Individualized Attention:** Effective coaches tailor their approach to each swimmer's abilities, providing them with the guidance and feedback they need to improve (Speakers 2, 3)
- **Technical Expertise:** Focusing on proper technique development lays the foundation for future success and prevents bad habits that can lead to frustration (Speakers 3 and 5).
- **Supportive Environment:** Coaches who create a team atmosphere where swimmers feel supported and encouraged can foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie (Speakers 3, 6, and 7).
- **Building Confidence:** Positive reinforcement, celebrating personal bests, and creating opportunities for each swimmer to shine can boost confidence and motivate young athletes (Speakers 4 and 7).

Coaching that Addresses Challenges

Effective coaches can also play a significant role in mitigating the challenges young swimmers face:

- **Balancing Pressure and Progress:** Coaches can help manage expectations, focusing on effort and personal growth, goal setting, and celebrating improvements (Speaker 8).
- **Navigating Puberty:** A supportive coach can understand the physical changes associated with puberty and adapt training accordingly while offering encouragement (Speaker 4).
- **Transitioning Teams:** Coaches can help bridge the gap between learn-to-swim programs and competitive teams, ensuring a smooth and positive transition for young athletes (Speaker 1).
- **Finding the Fun:** Incorporating engaging activities, dryland exercises, and fostering social interaction during practice can make swimming more enjoyable, a

key factor highlighted by Speaker 7.

Creating Positive Relationships

The coach-athlete relationship is crucial. Speakers highlighted the importance of getting along with coaches and feeling connected (Speakers 1 and 2). Coaches who act as mentors, role models, and positive influences can significantly impact a young swimmer's experience (Speakers 2, 6, and 9).

Navigating the Challenges: Keeping Young Swimmers Engaged

This section explores the challenges young swimmers face that can lead them to leave the sport, as identified by the speakers in the focus groups. By understanding these hurdles, coaches, parents, and young athletes can work together to create a more positive and sustainable swimming experience.

- **The Pressure to Perform and the Importance of Progress:** The pressure to perform and achieve consistent time improvements can be a significant hurdle for young athletes (Speakers 3, 5, and 8). This pressure, coupled with a lack of perceived progress, can lead to demoralization and ultimately result in quitting (Speakers 2 and 8).
- **The Physical and Social Changes of Puberty:** The physical changes accompanying puberty can be particularly challenging for young swimmers, especially girls (Speakers 3, 4, and 5). These changes can make it difficult to maintain performance levels, leading to frustration and questioning of their efforts (Speaker 3).
- **Balancing Training with Fun and Social Connection:** The intense training demands associated with competitive swimming can lead to burnout, especially if practices lack enjoyment and social interaction (Speakers 1, 2, and 3). Young athletes who do not find a sense of community and belonging within the team may be likelier to seek out activities that offer a more robust social component (Speaker

6).

- **Creating a Supportive Environment:** A lack of support from coaches or parents can significantly contribute to a swimmer's quitting decision (Speaker 5).

Unrealistic expectations, focusing solely on winning at a young age, and lacking foundational skill development can create a negative experience (Speakers 2 and 5).

- **The Transition from Learn-to-Swim to Competitive Teams:** The transition from learn-to-swim programs to competitive teams can be challenging for young athletes due to the significant gap in skill level (Speaker 1). This highlights the need for well-structured programs that bridge this gap and ensure a smooth and encouraging transition.
- **Encouraging a Growth Mindset:** Developing a growth mindset that emphasizes effort, learning from mistakes, and celebrating personal bests, rather than solely focusing on winning and times, can keep young swimmers motivated (Speaker 10).

Supporting Research

A recurring theme is the importance of coaches fostering positive and supportive relationships with athletes. Parental involvement in focus groups underscores this notion. Parents view swim coaches as highly trustworthy, which is a key reason they keep their kids swimming (USA Swimming Survey, 2018).

Equipping coaches with knowledge in this crucial area can be achieved through educational programs offered by organizations like USA Swimming and ASCA. These programs, delivered via webinars, clinics, and online modules provide avenues for coach development. Better-trained coaches lead to better retention, which suggests that there is a significantly higher drop-out rate among athletes coached by untrained personnel. This focus on positive relationships aligns with John O'Sullivan's 2023 ASCA World Clinic presentation that emphasized a coaching philosophy centered on athlete well-being rather than solely on

winning. These ideas resonate with Tim Welsh's 2019 interview on coaching philosophy, where he highlighted the importance of a "whole-athlete" approach that considers social, emotional, and physical aspects, recognizing that an athlete's holistic well-being impacts performance (Swimming World Magazine, 2019)

Supporting the concept of a well-rounded athlete, a 2018 USA Swimming poll revealed that 83% of U.S. Olympic swimmers participated in multiple sports during their youth [8]. This statistic highlights the prevalence of multi-sport participation among high-level athletes. Similar findings emerged from a study by Warner (2022) on professional lacrosse players, where 88.6% identified as multi-sport athletes through high school, and a significant 96.8% discouraged early sports specialization for their children (Warner, 2022).

Considerable research has been conducted on the significance of enjoyment in youth sports. According to a survey conducted by Project Play, an initiative by the Aspen Institute, parents prioritize their children's fun and joy in sports participation. Despite this, concerns are raised in an article about children feeling pressured to perform due to financial investments made by parents and societal emphasis on winning. When sports cease to be enjoyable, children are more likely to disengage. A survey of youth sports participants revealed that winning ranked 40th out of 81 factors contributing to their happiness, with positive team dynamics, effort, positive coaching, and learning ranking higher ("New Study Dispels Myths").

Although many young athletes prefer to keep their sports experience confined to the field, well-meaning parents often interfere by offering feedback and critiquing performance after a game or practice. This can lead to challenging car rides home, where children seek support rather than a detailed event review. This juxtaposes the goal of the USA Swimming Athlete Development Model (ADM), which aims to provide a positive experience for athletes, coaches, and parents involved in swimming. Creating a positive experience for all stakeholders significantly enhances the likelihood of their continued engagement in the sport, ultimately contributing to better retention rates.

Focus Group Discussion

Coaches and parents can work together to create a positive swimming experience for young athletes by incorporating these fun elements and fostering a supportive environment through parental involvement. This approach can help keep them engaged and motivated and develop a lifelong love of the sport.

Supporting Research

All children will eventually reach puberty and go through regular changes. As highlighted by parents in the focus groups, this is an area of importance that could be addressed to help youths navigate through this period and remain in sports with support. Programs like the Dove #KeepHerConfident initiative ([Dove](#)), aim to raise awareness about bodily changes in adolescents as they move through puberty to keep kids involved in sports. Resources and tools are available for coaches, parents, and key stakeholders, allowing young athletes the opportunity to share and work through challenges.

Even though research shows that moderate pressure to perform can motivate young athletes, there's a fine line. Studies, including Merkel (2013), highlight the high drop-out rates in youth sports, potentially linked to this pressure outweighing the fun. The key seems to be a balanced approach. Merkel (2013) emphasizes prioritizing skill development and enjoyment over winning at a young age. This aligns with the concept of celebrating progress, even when facing setbacks due to puberty, which can particularly impact young female athletes. Creating a positive experience is crucial for keeping young athletes engaged in sports.

Focus Group Conclusion

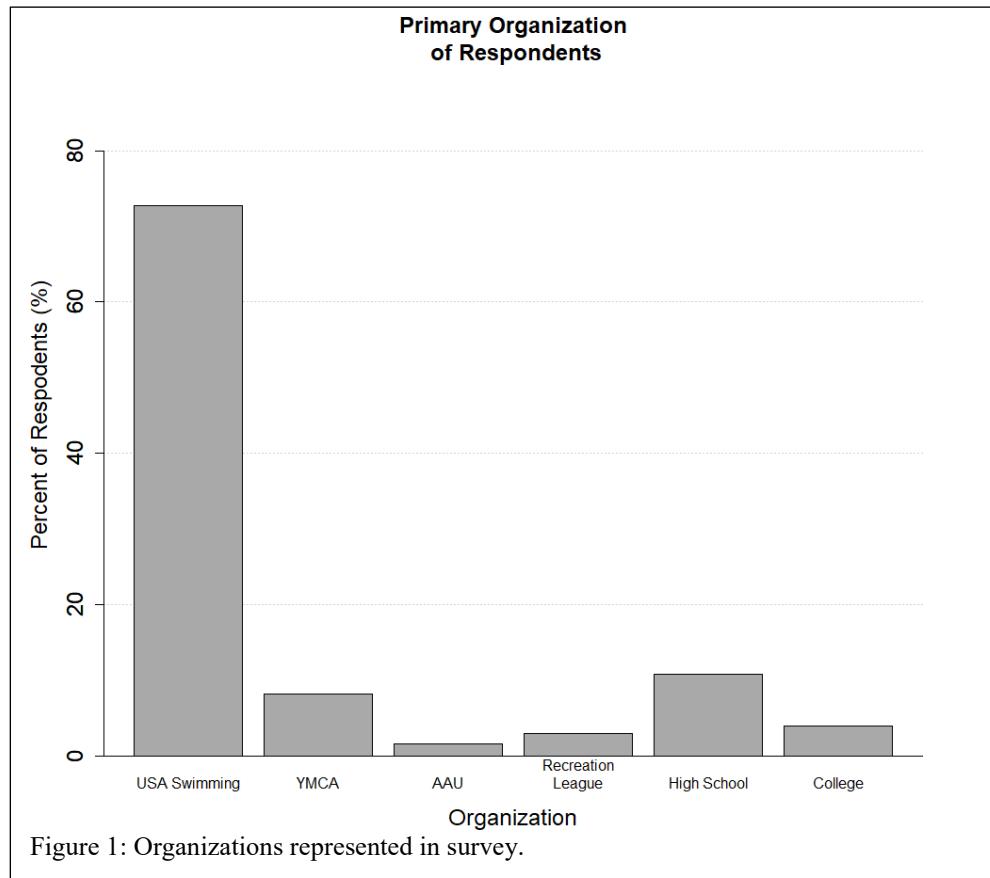
By acknowledging these challenges and working together to create a supportive environment that prioritizes enjoyment, skill development, and a healthy balance, coaches, parents, and young swimmers can navigate these hurdles and foster a lifelong love for the sport.

To ensure a positive swimming experience for young athletes, coaches and parents can collaborate to create a supportive and enjoyable environment. By prioritizing fun, skill

development, and a healthy balance, they can help young swimmers overcome challenges and develop a lifelong love for the sport. By providing personalized attention and promoting their athletes' well-being, coaches can play a pivotal role in keeping them engaged and fostering a positive attitude toward swimming.

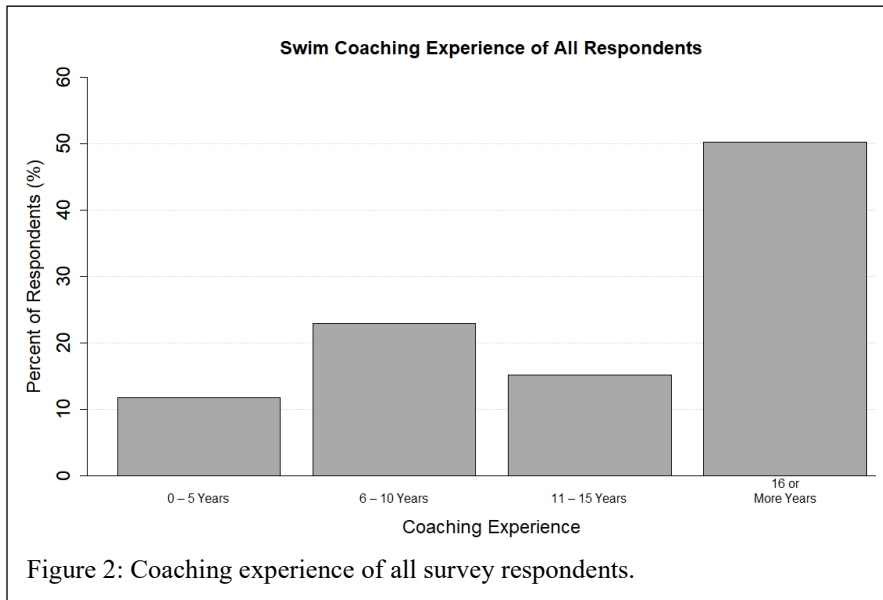
Survey Data

There were 257 unique respondents to the Fellows' online coaching survey, and these coaches worked with 306 swim programs, as nearly 20% worked with more than one swim association (e.g., high school and USA Swimming;



Appendix C). The coaches were from 56 local swimming committees (LSCs) or swim regions of the US, meaning all but three were represented. Most of the respondents were primarily affiliated with USA Swimming (80.2%), with high school (8.2%), YMCA (5.4%), college (4.7%), recreational leagues (0.8%), and AAU (0.8%) programs also represented.

Regarding the coaching experience of the respondents, the majority (50.4% of USA Swimming respondents and 50.2% of all respondents) have been coaching for 16 or more years. This suggests that the survey captured insights from experienced coaches who have a wealth of knowledge about the sport and athlete development. The second largest group consists of

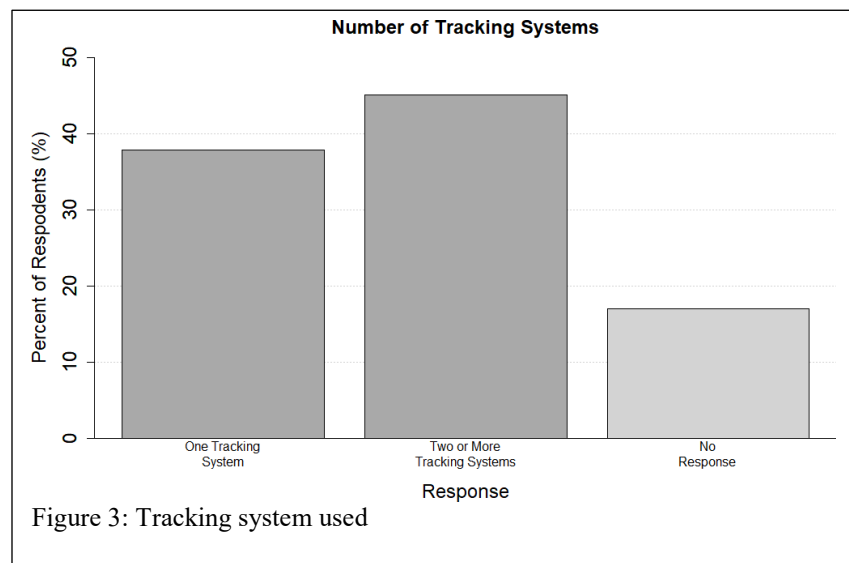


coaches with 6-10 years of experience (22.8% for USA Swimming respondents; 23.0% for all respondents), followed by those with 11-15 years (16.1% for USA Swimming respondents; 15.2% for all respondents),

Coaches with 0-5 years of experience were 10.8% for USA Swimming respondents, and 11.75% for all respondents.

Coaches were surveyed regarding their tracking system of athlete retention. Nearly half of the respondents (48.2% for USA Swimming; 45.1% for all respondents) reported using two or more tracking systems

(Figure 3), while around a third (32.6% for USA Swimming and 37.9% for all respondents) use only one tracking system. This indicates that the majority of coaches rely on multiple tools to monitor and track



athlete performance and progress. The most common tracking system used was Hytek (41.2%), followed by USA Swims 3.0 (32.8%) and Excel (12.7%). A segment of respondents (45.3%) indicated using multiple systems concurrently, suggesting a strategy of integrating different

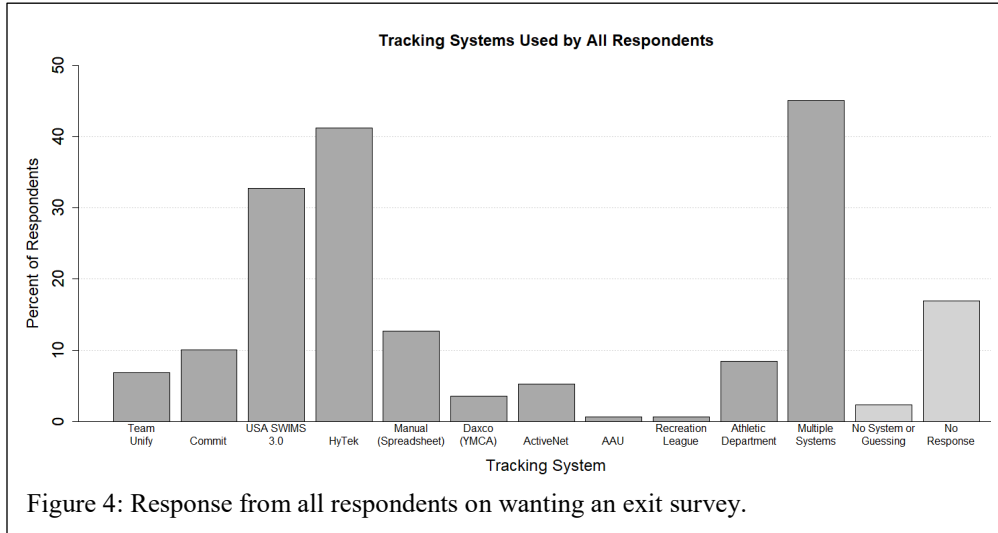
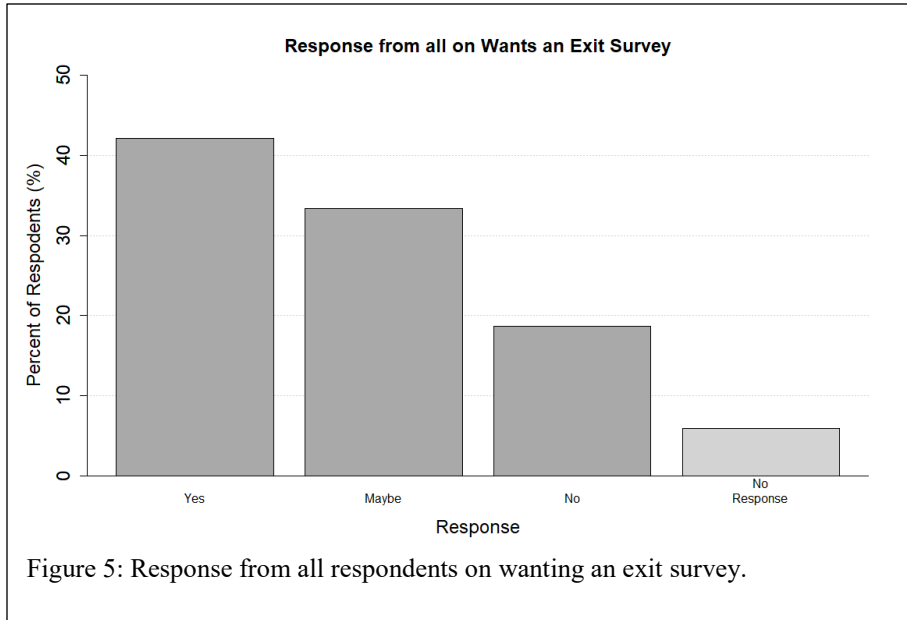


Figure 4: Response from all respondents on wanting an exit survey.

platforms or methods to capture comprehensive retention and attrition insights.

However, as a considerable

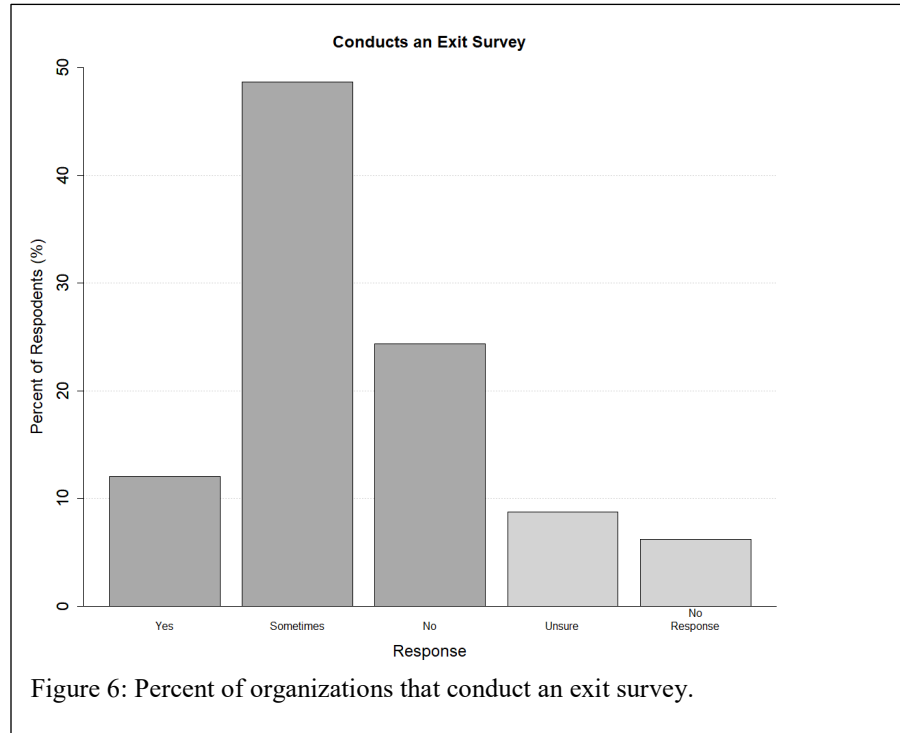
number of respondents reported either using no formal tracking system (2.3%) or did not provide a response (16.9%), which could signify a lack of established data management practices or resources dedicated to this area, further evaluation on tracking needs and practices is warranted. Overall, the data highlights the wide range of approaches and capabilities among NGBs when it comes to systematically tracking retention and attrition figures. While some have adopted specialized software or employ multiple tracking mechanisms, others appear to rely on more manual processes or lack formalized systems altogether. This diversity tracking also underscores potential opportunities for knowledge-sharing, resource allocation, and capacity-building efforts to help streamline and enhance data tracking practices across various sports organizations, ultimately supporting better understanding and strategic decision-making around athlete retention challenges.



When asked about their opinion on exit surveys, 43.7% of USA Swimming respondents and 42.2% of all respondents expressed interest in having an exit survey. A significant portion (36.9% for USA

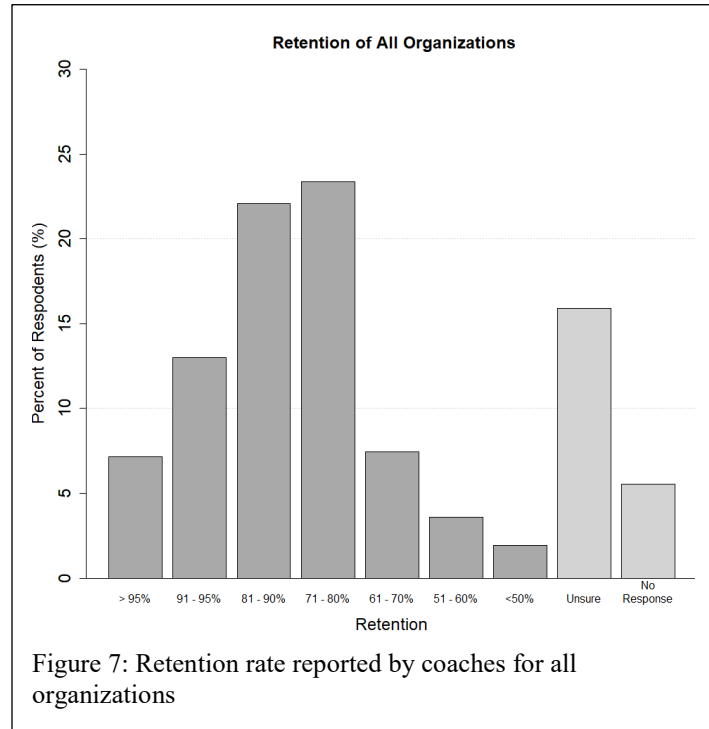
Swimming and 33.3% for all respondents) were unsure, answering "maybe." Only a small percentage (18.9% for USA Swimming and 18.6% for all respondents) were not in favor of an exit survey. This suggests that many coaches see value in gathering feedback from athletes who leave the sport, potentially to identify areas for improvement in athlete retention and development. Overall, the data suggests that there is significant interest and potential demand for implementing an exit survey tool across various NGBs. Such a tool could provide valuable insights into the reasons behind individuals leaving their respective organizations, helping to identify areas for improvement, address concerns, and potentially improve retention rates or organizational practices.

Currently, most teams do not consistently conduct an exit survey of the swimmers. For all the respondents, with all their organizations, 48.7% sometimes conduct an exit survey, while 24.4% do not and 12% do conduct an exit survey. This suggests that although it appears



coaches see the need for conducting an exit survey, the implementation and usage of exit surveys is not widespread. As the majority of respondents do not conduct exit surveys or employ them on an ad-hoc basis, further evaluation of the reasons behind the low adoption of exit surveys, of the need to address potential barriers or challenges, and of the guidance, resources, or training to coaches on the benefits and best practices of implementing structured exit survey systems is needed. By increasing the usage of exit surveys, the swim organization and NGB could potentially gain more valuable insights into the factors influencing individuals' decisions to leave the organization, enabling them to take data-driven actions to improve retention and address areas of concern.

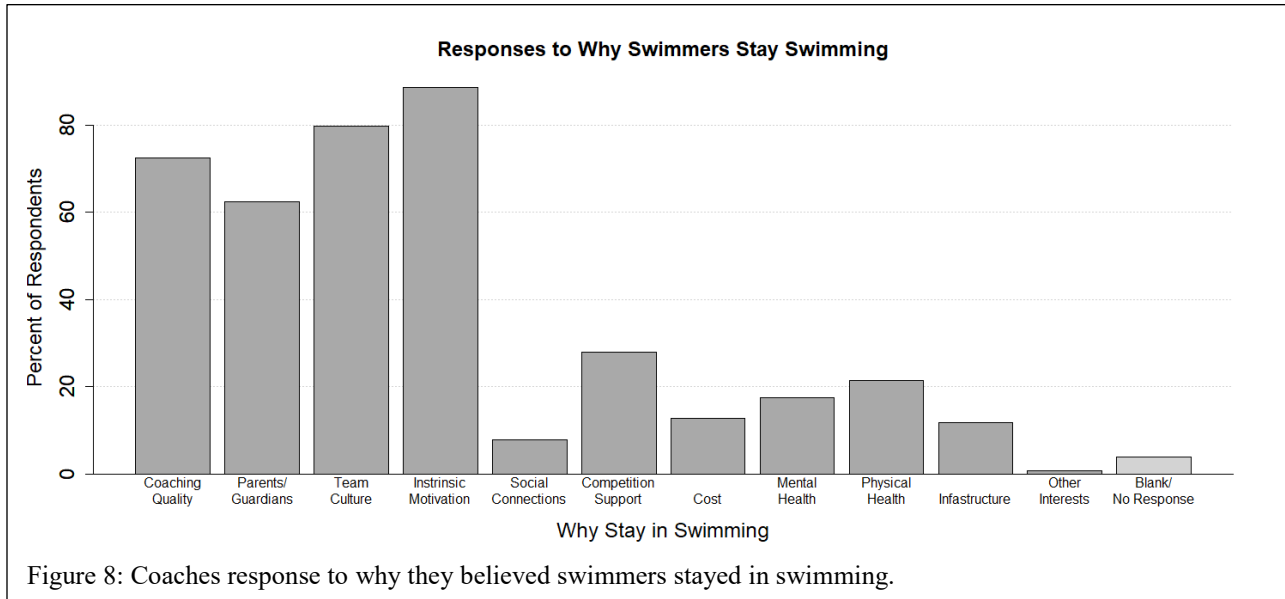
Of the swim organizations represented in the survey, the data shows a wide range of retention rates, from greater than 95% retention to less than 50% retention, with nearly 25% of respondents leaving the question blank or unsure of their retention rate. From the distribution, most teams 23.4% report a 71-80% retention rate, followed closely by 81-90% (22.1%). Overall, this data paints a picture of varying retention success across the



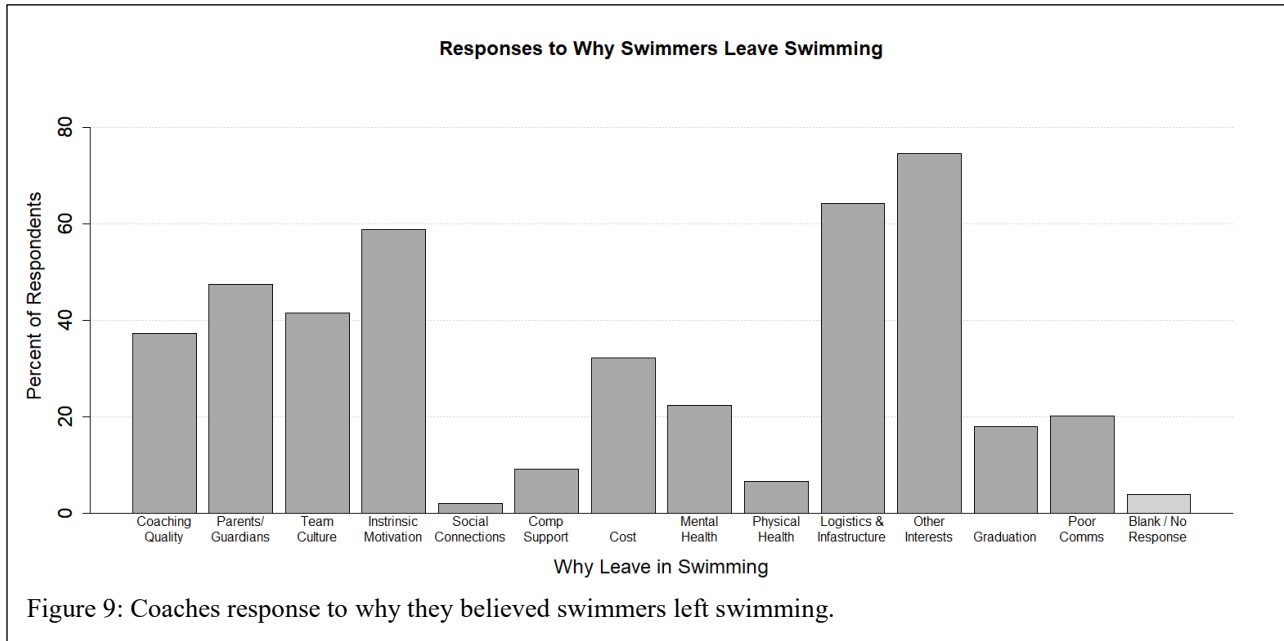
organizations surveyed. While a majority seem to retain 70% or more of their participants, there is clearly room for improvement, especially among the organizations struggling with retention rates below 60%.

Without more context, we cannot definitively conclude why some organizations achieve higher retention than others. Factors like program quality, participant experience, affordability, and competition from other activities could all play a role. However, this data provides a valuable benchmark for organizations to compare their own retention rates and highlights that participant retention is an important issue that many youth sports organizations have to address.

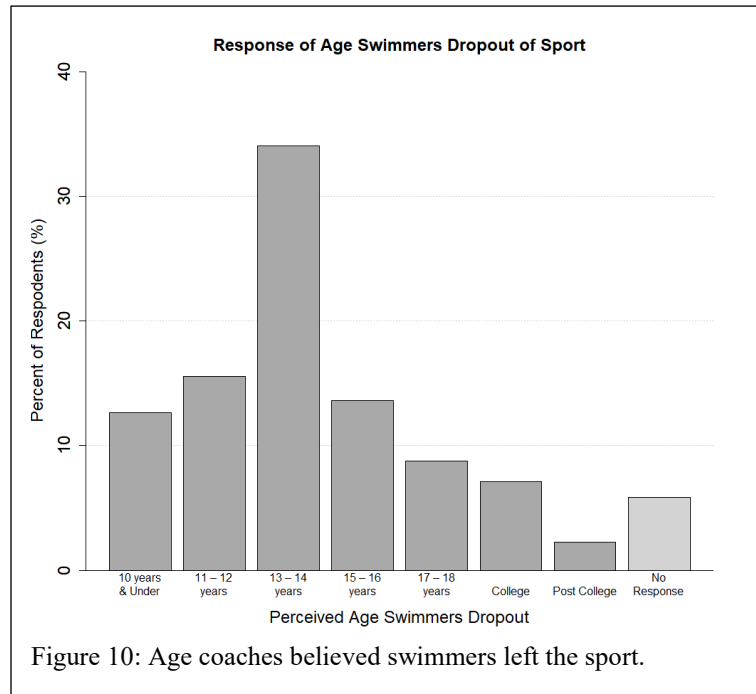
In the Fellows' survey, when coaches were asked up to five reasons why they felt swimmers stayed in the sport, the top five responses, in order were: Intrinsic Motivation (88.6%), Team Culture (79.9%), Coaching Quality (72.4%), Parental Influence (62.3%), and Support for Competition (27.9%).



The reverse of the question was also asked, with why the coaches believed swimmers left the sport. The top five responses as to why coaches believed swimmers left the sport, in order were: Other Interests (74.7%), Scheduling/Logistics/Infrastructure (64.3%), Intrinsic Motivation (58.8%), Parental Influence (47.7%), and Team Culture (41.5%). Parental influence, team culture, and intrinsic motivation of the swimmer were both top reasons for staying in swimming and for leaving swimming. Factors such as cost, mental health, physical health, and infrastructure are not as prominently cited by the coaches. This suggests that while these aspects may play a role, they are not perceived as the primary drivers of swimmer retention compared to the interpersonal and motivational factors.



When coaches were queried on when swimmers left the sport, the primary age the coaches noted by 13-14 years (34.1%), with 11-12 years (15.6%), 15-16 years (13.6%), and 10 years & under (12.7%), being the next most commonly noted ages to drop out of swimming. The data highlights the critical importance of the teenage years, particularly ages 13-16, in terms of swimmer retention. To



mitigate dropout rates, swimming organizations and NGB should focus on implementing targeted strategies and support systems to engage and retain swimmers during this vulnerable

period. This could include initiatives to help swimmers manage academic and social pressures, maintain motivation and enjoyment in the sport, and navigate the challenges of the high school years. By understanding the key age ranges at which swimmers are most likely to leave the sport, organizations can develop proactive approaches to address the specific needs and concerns of athletes at these critical junctures, ultimately working to keep more swimmers involved and committed to the sport over the long term.

Survey Data Discussion

The aim of the coaches' survey was to gather insights into various aspects of swimmer retention and attrition within the swimming community. The findings highlight the critical role that coaches play in shaping a swimmer's experience and long-term commitment to the sport. Coaches have the power to create a positive and nurturing environment that fosters a love for swimming, encourages personal growth, and helps swimmers navigate challenges. They serve as mentors, teachers, and role models, providing guidance, support, and motivation. The fact that coaches are identified as the top influencer suggests that the quality of coaching and the coach-swimmer relationship are paramount in determining whether a swimmer continues in the sport.

Parents and guardians are recognized as the second most influential group, underscoring the importance of family support in a swimmer's journey. Parents play a vital role in providing emotional encouragement, financial resources, and logistical support, such as transportation to practices and meets. They also help create a home environment that prioritizes and values swimming. The prominence of parents/guardians in the responses indicates that a strong and positive family dynamic is essential for a swimmer's long-term success and persistence in the sport.

Team culture ranks as the third most significant factor, reflecting the impact of the social environment on a swimmer's experience. A positive team culture, characterized by supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and shared goals, can greatly enhance a

swimmer's enjoyment and commitment to the sport. When swimmers feel connected to their teammates and part of a larger community, they are more likely to remain engaged and motivated.

Intrinsic motivations and social connections/friends are also mentioned, although less frequently than coaches, parents, and team culture. This suggests that while personal drive and peer relationships are important, they may be secondary to the influence of authority figures and the overall team environment in shaping a swimmer's decision to stay or leave.

Interestingly, factors such as swim governance and costs are not as prominently cited, indicating that while they may play a role, they are not perceived as the primary determinants of swimmer retention compared to the interpersonal and cultural factors mentioned above. However, the infrastructure, facilities, and logistics of practice can influence whether an athlete leaves the program. If annual or exit surveys are provided to the swimmers, it may be that these elements of practice can be mitigated to reduce the likelihood of losing the swimmer.

In conclusion, the coaches and parents/guardians have a profound impact on a swimmer's decision to remain in or leave the sport. These findings underscore the importance of fostering positive relationships, providing support and guidance, and creating a nurturing team environment. By focusing on these key influencers and prioritizing the well-being and development of swimmers, the swimming community can work towards increasing retention and helping athletes thrive in the sport long-term.

Conclusions drawn from the findings is that the swimming community values and benefits from the presence of experienced coaches who bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the sport. These coaches serve as mentors and role models, helping to shape the next generation of coaches and swimmers. Secondly, the data suggests that coaching swimming can be a long-term career path, with many coaches remaining dedicated to the sport for well over a decade. This longevity indicates a strong passion for swimming and

a commitment to athlete development. Finally, the smaller percentage of newer coaches highlights the importance of providing support, training, and mentorship opportunities to help them grow and succeed in their roles.

The most frequently cited reason for swimmers leaving the sport is coaching quality. This highlights the critical role that coaches play in shaping an athlete's experience and long-term commitment to swimming. If swimmers feel that the coaching they receive is subpar, lacking in support, guidance, or expertise, they are more likely to become discouraged and ultimately leave the sport. This finding underscores the importance of investing in coach education, development, and mentorship to ensure that athletes receive high-quality coaching throughout their swimming journey.

Supporting Research and Insight from other NGBs

Based on the provided document, several key insights can be drawn that relate to swimming attrition and retention, as well as lessons learned from other National Governing Bodies (NGBs):

USA Lacrosse has experienced significant growth in participation from 2001 to 2018, potentially due to their focus on core values such as fun, player-centered activities, small-sided and free play, multi-sport participation, physical literacy, trained coaches, and inclusive and age-appropriate practices. Swimming can consider adopting similar values to improve athlete retention. Additionally, USA Lacrosse offers lower membership fees compared to USA Swimming, which may help reduce barriers to entry and encourage more participation.

The US Lacrosse Participation Survey 2017 found that the top reasons why athletes stay in lacrosse are because it's fun, they enjoy the challenge, they love the sport, they like being part of a team, and they have supportive coaches and teammates. These findings suggest that creating a positive, enjoyable, and supportive environment is crucial for athlete retention in swimming as well.

USA Swimming's American Development Model (ADM) aims to keep athletes,

coaches, and parents engaged in the sport longer by providing a positive experience, teaching life skills, and focusing on athlete-centered outcomes such as competence, character, confidence, and connection. Implementing and promoting the ADM principles could help address swimming attrition.

Project Play's research highlights several trends in youth sports participation, including a decline in team sports participation among younger children, a shift towards community-based sports, and a growing lack of interest in sports among children. These trends underscore the importance of making swimming more accessible, affordable, and enjoyable for young athletes to maintain their engagement.

The National Standards for Youth Sports emphasize child-centered policies and philosophies, trained volunteers, defined parental roles and responsibilities, and safe playing environments. Adopting these standards in swimming could help create a more supportive and nurturing environment for young athletes, potentially reducing attrition rates.

Interviews and podcasts with industry experts, such as Brendan Hansen from USA Swimming and Troy Urhadl, an athletic director and coach, emphasize the importance of improving the experience of coaches and athletes, making positive connections, and focusing on the broader benefits of sports participation beyond winning or scholarships. These insights suggest that prioritizing athlete and coach development, as well as fostering a supportive community, could help improve retention in swimming.

Linda Flanagan's book "Take the Game Back" (2022) provides a historical context for the current state of youth sports and highlights the need for change in the collegiate scholarship system and increased investment in scholastic sports. This suggests that addressing systemic issues and creating more opportunities for swimmers at the high school and college levels could help reduce attrition rates.

Finally, the article by Gibson (2023) discusses the potential link between decreased independence among children and the youth mental health crisis. This highlights the importance

of providing young swimmers with opportunities for unstructured play, exploration, and autonomy to support their overall well-being and potentially improve retention in the sport.

In summary, to address swimming attrition and improve retention, USA Swimming can learn from other NGBs and youth sports organizations by focusing on creating a fun, supportive, and inclusive environment, promoting athlete-centered development, reducing barriers to entry, and addressing systemic issues in the sport. By prioritizing the overall well-being and long-term development of swimmers, USA Swimming can create a more sustainable and engaging environment that keeps athletes involved in the sport for years to come.

Key Recommendations

Use of annual surveys and exit surveys of membership

In order to understand why swimmers are leaving, it is important to ask them, not only as individual leave, but it could be annually as well. Swim organizations from the NGB to the club level should ask specific questions in their surveys to understand why swimmers are staying in the sport, why they may leave or have left their club or the sport. By gathering this information, teams and governing bodies can identify areas for improvement and take steps to enhance the overall swimming experience for their athletes. Elements of swim organization surveys should include:

1. **Satisfaction with communication:** Effective communication is crucial for the success of any swim team. By asking about satisfaction with communication, teams and organizations can gauge whether parents and swimmers feel well-informed about important matters such as practice schedules, meet information, team events, and individual progress. If respondents express dissatisfaction with communication, the team may need to reevaluate their communication strategies and tools to ensure that all stakeholders are kept in the loop, reducing the likelihood of swimmers leaving due to lack of information or clarity.

2. **Coaching-related questions:** The coaching staff plays a vital role in shaping a

swimmer's experience and decision to continue participating in the sport. By asking specific questions about the coaches' knowledge, professionalism, communication skills, and ability to create a positive environment, swim teams can identify any areas where coaches may need additional support or training. For example, if many respondents express dissatisfaction with a coach's ability to educate parents on swimming, the team may need to provide the coach with resources or guidance on how to effectively communicate swimming concepts and techniques to parents. Addressing coaching-related concerns can help foster a more supportive and nurturing environment, reducing the likelihood of swimmers leaving due to negative experiences with their coaches. At the national level, understanding weaknesses in coaching quality can provide the basis for developing new material for coach education.

3. **Open-ended questions:** Open-ended questions, such as what respondents like most and least about the swim team program, allow for more detailed and personalized feedback. These questions can reveal issues or strengths that may not have been covered in the specific survey questions. For example, a parent might mention that they appreciate the team's focus on character development and sportsmanship, providing valuable insight into what keeps their swimmer engaged and motivated. On the other hand, a respondent might express concern about the lack of social events or team-building activities, highlighting an area where the team could improve to foster a stronger sense of community and belonging. By carefully reviewing this feedback, swim teams can identify trends and take targeted actions to address any concerns, ultimately improving retention rates and ensuring a positive experience for all swimmers.

4. **Optional contact information:** Providing an option for respondents to share their contact information demonstrates the swim team's commitment to addressing individual concerns and fostering open communication. By allowing parents to request direct contact, teams can follow up on specific issues and work collaboratively with families to find solutions. This personalized approach can help prevent swimmers from leaving the club or sport due to unresolved problems or concerns, as they feel heard and supported by the team's

leadership.

In conclusion, asking a comprehensive set of questions in surveys helps swim teams gather valuable information about why swimmers may leave or have left their club or the sport. By addressing concerns related to fees, practice times, pool conditions, communication, coaching, and overall satisfaction, while also providing opportunities for open-ended feedback and direct contact, teams can create a more supportive and engaging environment that encourages long-term participation and success in the sport of swimming.

National Governing Body (NGB) Exit Survey

One key recommendation is for USA Swimming to implement a systematic process to directly reach out to families who do not renew their membership after a year. By sending personalized emails or conducting surveys with these families, USA Swimming can gain invaluable insights into why they are choosing not to return or where they are taking their participation instead. This critical data can help the national governing body pinpoint areas where they need to allocate more resources and focus efforts to better retain their membership base long-term.

If the feedback reveals that families are leaving the sport of swimming altogether, USA Swimming can dig deeper to uncover the root causes behind this attrition - whether it stemmed from issues with the team environment, concerns about coaching staff, complaints about the intense time commitment required, or any other factors that ultimately drove them away from the sport. Conversely, if families are simply leaving the USA Swimming organization to join other clubs or leagues like AAU or YMCA instead, the surveys can shine a light on the specific reasons motivating that shift in affiliation. Armed with this valuable feedback directly from the membership, USA Swimming's leadership can make more informed, data-driven decisions to address weaknesses in their programming, policies, pricing structure or other areas in need of improvement. This can enhance their overall offerings and value proposition to families.

Another key area of focus identified in the research is coaches' deep interest in better

understanding athlete retention patterns and improving those metrics. While the updated SWIMS 3.0 platform now provides retention data visualized in graphical form, it still lacks the critical "why" behind those numbers and trends. As a forward-thinking class of fellows, we want to develop an intuitive survey tool that empowers coaches to solicit direct feedback from athletes or families who choose not to re-register for the next season. Coaches gain deeper insights by uncovering the specific reasons behind everyone's departure decision.

This comprehensive data has immense value on two levels. First, it allows USA Swimming to analyze retention challenges through a national lens, identifying broader trends, demographics, and areas for improvement across its entire membership base. However, the data is equally powerful when viewed through a local lens - enabling individual club owners and coaches to pinpoint unique obstacles in their specific program that may be driving attrition, such as failing to meet certain members' needs and expectations. Alternatively, the feedback may reflect normal life transitions and stage departures like aging out or graduating from the sport.

Regardless of the reasons, by understanding the root causes and underlying factors behind each family's choices, clubs can make properly informed adjustments to better serve their members—whether that means enhancing programming, retraining staff, shifting pricing models, or making any other changes to provide better service and value where needed.

ASCA Exit Survey for Swim Organizations

To facilitate this virtuous cycle of continuous feedback and improvement, our proposal is for the American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA) to provide this survey tool as a customizable framework directly to their membership - the thousands of coaches across the country. ASCA can develop and offer a generic baseline survey template containing the core question areas and topics we've identified through our exhaustive research into retention patterns and membership journeys. However, rather than forcing a one-size-fits-all survey, coaches would have the ability to tailor certain portions to dig deeper into issues or priorities

unique to their specific club's situation, culture, and demographics.

The fellows' class would be thrilled to collaborate directly with ASCA in helping to develop, test, and ultimately disseminate this powerful survey resource to swimming programs nationwide.

Giving coaches an easy, affordable way to solicit structured feedback from both current members and departing members will shine a bright light on retention obstacles at all levels. But it will also illuminate the areas of strength that are successfully keeping other families engaged, invested and renewing their participation year over year. This continuous improvement cycle, fueled by honest feedback loops, can elevate the overall swimming experience for all.

The retention and attrition of athletes in USA Swimming is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach to understand and address. By examining the factors that contribute to athlete retention and those that lead to attrition, we can develop strategies to create a more supportive and engaging environment for swimmers of all ages and levels. One of the most critical factors in athlete retention is the quality of coaching and the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches who prioritize an athlete-centered approach, focusing on the holistic development of their swimmers and creating a supportive environment, are more likely to foster long-term participation. As Tim Welsh eloquently states, "The soul of a coach is passion for swimmers in the water, the sport is the tool." This highlights the importance of coaches understanding that they are not merely training athletes to perform a specific set of skills, but rather developing individuals with unique needs, aspirations, and challenges. By building strong, positive relationships with their athletes and demonstrating a genuine interest in their overall well-being, coaches can create a foundation for lasting engagement in the sport.

However, even the most dedicated and supportive coaches may struggle to retain athletes if the overall environment of the sport is not conducive to long-term participation. One of the key factors in creating a positive sports experience is ensuring that athletes are

intrinsically motivated and find joy in their participation. The US Lacrosse Member Survey found that the top reasons why athletes stay in lacrosse are because it's fun, they enjoy the challenge, they love the sport, they like being part of a team, and they have supportive coaches and teammates. Similarly, Troy Urhadl's podcast emphasizes that the primary reason kids play sports is to have fun, and it is the coaches' responsibility to create an environment that fosters enjoyment. When sports become overly focused on winning, early specialization, and extrinsic rewards, the intrinsic motivation that fuels long-term participation can be eroded, leading to burnout and attrition.

The pressure for early specialization and intense training is another significant factor contributing to athlete attrition in USA Swimming. The American Academy of Pediatrics report expresses concern about the current state of youth sports, citing excessive pressure from parents and coaches to prioritize winning over enjoyment, which can lead to overtraining, injuries, and burnout. Dr. Jennifer Etnier's research also suggests that early specialization and a singular focus on one or two sports for an extended period can be a major cause of burnout. To combat this, USA Swimming should consider promoting multi-sport participation and age-appropriate training, allowing young athletes to develop a broad range of skills and maintain their enjoyment of physical activity.

Parents also play a crucial role in shaping their child's sports experience and can contribute to either retention or attrition. The Washington Post article "Are parents ruining youth sports?" highlights how parents' emphasis on excellence over participation and their push for early specialization can lead to kids quitting sports altogether. In contrast, the article "What Makes a Nightmare Sports Parent - and What Makes a Great One" stresses the importance of parents focusing on the joy of watching their child play, rather than engaging in critical post-game discussions. By educating parents on their role in creating a positive sports environment and providing them with strategies to support their child's long-term engagement, USA Swimming can work to reduce attrition rates.

Ultimately, addressing the issue of attrition in USA Swimming requires a systemic approach that involves all stakeholders, from athletes and coaches to parents and administrators. This may include creating more accessible and affordable programming, training coaches in positive youth development, working with parents to create a supportive environment, and learning from the successes of other National Governing Bodies (NGBs). For example, USA Lacrosse's focus on core values and age-appropriate practices could serve as a model for USA Swimming in developing a comprehensive strategy to reduce attrition and improve retention.

By understanding the factors that contribute to athlete retention and attrition, and by implementing evidence-based strategies to create a more supportive and engaging environment, USA Swimming can work to ensure that more athletes remain involved in the sport for the long term. This not only benefits the individual athletes but also strengthens the organization as a whole, creating a more vibrant and sustainable community of swimmers, coaches, and supporters.

Limitations of Research

One of the primary challenges in this research project is the broad scope and multifaceted nature of the issue being investigated. The wide-ranging scope encompasses various aspects, such as data collection from multiple organizations (USA Swimming, YMCA, and AAU), understanding the factors contributing to attrition and developing tools to address the problem. The complexity of the issue and the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including minors, may make it difficult to investigate all facets thoroughly within the given timeframe and resources.

Another consideration is the limitation of available data. While the project intends to collect data from USA Swimming, YMCA, and AAU, it is evident that obtaining comprehensive and consistent data across these organizations is challenging. For example, the YMCA's lack of age-specific data and the potential difficulty in gathering clean data from

YMCAs that do not use TeamUnify may hinder the ability to draw accurate conclusions. Additionally, the absence of data on swimmers who have already left the sport may limit understanding of the reasons behind their departure. Further, recreational leagues and high school teams do not have aggregate data to be able to draw conclusions on participation and retention in the sport, particularly when individuals may move from year-round swimming to high school only.

The research project also relies heavily on focus groups and surveys as the primary data collection methods. While these methods can provide valuable insights, they have inherent limitations. For instance, focus groups may not represent the entire population and may be influenced by group dynamics. The focus groups also consisted of parents still involved in the sport, so they are making comments on their experiences in the sport, rather than from those who left the sport. On the other hand, surveys may suffer from low response rates, self-selection bias, and the inability to capture the full complexity of individual experiences. Moreover, the project's focus on surveying coaches and parents may not directly capture the swimmers' perspectives, who are the key stakeholders in this issue.

The time constraints and ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic may also impact the research process. With limited time for data collection, analysis, and resource development, the project may not be able to delve as deeply into the issue as desired. Furthermore, the pandemic may have altered the landscape of youth sports participation, making it difficult to draw conclusions based on historical data alone. For example, typically, USA Swimming has a membership increase the immediate year after the Olympics (the “Olympic bump”, followed by a drop in participation numbers the subsequent years. With a 5-year cycle 2016-2021 between Olympics, the years after the “Olympic bump” would have been four years, instead of three, meaning more potential for loss of swimmers.

Finally, the scope of the research may limit the project's ultimate goal of creating resources to track and address swimmer attrition. While the project aims to identify trends and

factors contributing to attrition, developing comprehensive and practical system and set of tools to combat the issue may require further research, collaboration with experts in various fields (e.g., sports psychology, youth development), and long-term implementation and evaluation. With the increases in automated emails and ability to monitor real-time membership renewal, USA Swimming's SWIMS 3.0 may be an ideal system to implement an exit tool survey at the NGB level, with clubs utilizing exit surveys more tailored to their needs

Study Conclusion

From our focus group and survey studies, we can draw several conclusions and identify potential areas for further research or action within the swimming and broader sports communities. The data reveals a wide range of practices among National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and organizations regarding tracking retention and attrition numbers. While some entities have adopted specialized tracking systems like USA Swimming's SWIMS 3.0 or employ multiple tracking mechanisms, others rely on manual methods like spreadsheets or lack formalized systems altogether. This diversity highlights the need for knowledge-sharing, capacity-building initiatives, and resource allocation to streamline and enhance data-tracking practices across sports organizations.

The surveys consistently highlight coaching quality as one of the most significant factors influencing swimmer retention and attrition. Coaches are perceived as having a profound impact on athletes' decisions to stay or leave the sport. This underscores the importance of prioritizing coach education, development, and mentorship programs to foster effective coaching practices, create engaging environments, and provide guidance and support to swimmers.

Parental support and team culture emerge as critical factors in swimmer retention and attrition. The data suggests that when parents are actively involved, encouraging, and providing necessary resources, it creates a strong foundation for swimmers' commitment. Similarly, a positive team atmosphere, characterized by camaraderie, a sense of belonging, and shared goals,

can significantly enhance athlete engagement and motivation.

Intrinsic motivation and social connections are consistently highlighted as influential factors in swimmers' decisions to stay or leave the sport. Fostering a genuine love for swimming, setting personal goals, and cultivating strong peer relationships within the swimming community can help mitigate attrition rates and sustain long-term passion for the sport.

The data indicates that the early to mid-teenage years, particularly ages 13-16, are critical periods when coaches perceive a significant number of swimmers leaving the sport. This pattern suggests the need for targeted interventions and support strategies during these vulnerable transition points, potentially addressing factors such as changing interests, academic demands, social pressures, or burnout.

The surveys reveal a strong interest and potential demand for implementing exit survey tools across various NGBs and USA Swimming. However, the actual current usage and implementation of such tools appear to be relatively low. Increasing the adoption of exit surveys could provide valuable insights into the reasons behind individuals leaving organizations, enabling data-driven actions to improve retention and address areas of concern.

Based on these findings, several areas emerge for further research and potential action. Investigating best practices and strategies for coach education and development to enhance coaching quality and swimmer engagement is crucial. Exploring effective methods for facilitating parental support and involvement in swimming programs is also important.

By addressing these areas through collaborative efforts among NGBs, sports organizations, coaches, and researchers, the swimming and broader sports communities can work towards improving athlete retention rates, enhancing program effectiveness, and fostering long-term commitment and passion for sports participation.

Identifying strategies to cultivate positive team cultures and foster social connections among swimmers could be beneficial. Conducting in-depth studies to understand the specific

challenges and factors contributing to attrition during the critical 13-16 age range is necessary. Developing standardized exit survey tools and implementing pilot programs to assess their effectiveness in gathering valuable feedback for retention efforts could be valuable. Examining the barriers and challenges that prevent organizations from adopting robust tracking systems and implementing capacity-building initiatives to address these issues is essential.

As USA Swimming is the national governing body for the sport of swimming in the United States, they have a vested interest in understanding why athletes may choose to leave their club, the organization, or the sport entirely. By asking specific questions in a survey, USA Swimming can gather valuable insights into the factors that contribute to athlete retention and attrition, allowing them to make informed decisions and implement strategies to improve the overall swimming experience for their members.

One of the most important questions to ask is about the length of an athlete's membership and whether they consistently renew each year. This information can help USA Swimming identify patterns in membership renewal and pinpoint critical moments when athletes are most likely to leave. By understanding the reasons behind inconsistent renewals, such as conflicts with other activities, injuries, or financial concerns, the organization can develop targeted interventions to address these issues and encourage long-term participation.

Asking athletes to describe themselves as swimmers (competitive, open water, or fitness) can provide valuable information about their motivations and goals within the sport. This knowledge can help USA Swimming tailor its programs, events, and resources to better serve the needs of each type of swimmer, ultimately increasing satisfaction and reducing the likelihood of athletes leaving due to unmet expectations or lack of support.

To further enhance the swimmer experience, USA Swimming should inquire about athletes' interest in various programs designed to help them reach their goals. By gauging interest in initiatives such as performance tracking, online support communities, customized training plans, and dryland training resources, the organization can prioritize the development

and implementation of these programs. Offering targeted support and resources that align with athletes' needs and aspirations can foster a sense of belonging and encourage long-term engagement with the sport.

Investigating purchasing habits and brand loyalty among athletes can help USA Swimming attract and retain sponsors, ensuring financial stability and the ability to provide high-quality resources and experiences for its members. By understanding the factors that influence athletes' purchasing decisions, such as a company's sponsorship of USA Swimming, the organization can forge strategic partnerships that benefit both the sponsors and the athletes, creating a mutually beneficial ecosystem that supports the growth and success of the sport.

The role of coaches in athlete retention cannot be overstated. By asking questions about coach- athlete relationships, USA Swimming can identify the qualities and practices that contribute to positive experiences and long-term participation. Coaches who are supportive, attentive to individual needs, skilled, and respectful are more likely to create an environment that fosters athlete satisfaction and loyalty. By investing in coach education and development programs that emphasize these qualities, USA Swimming can ensure that athletes receive the support and guidance they need to thrive in the sport.

Finally, understanding the intrinsic motivations that drive athletes to swim, such as enjoyment, fitness, skill improvement, social connections, and competition, can help USA Swimming create an environment that nurtures these motivations. By asking athletes to rate their level of agreement with statements about why they swim, the organization can identify the most compelling reasons for participation and develop strategies to reinforce these factors. For example, if many athletes strongly agree that they swim for social reasons, USA Swimming could invest in team-building activities and events that foster a sense of community and belonging.

In conclusion, asking specific questions in a survey can provide USA Swimming with invaluable insights into the factors that contribute to athlete retention and attrition. By

understanding the reasons behind membership renewals, athlete motivations, program interests, purchasing habits, coach-athlete relationships, and intrinsic motivations, the organization can make data-driven decisions and implement strategies to enhance the overall swimming experience for its members. By fostering an environment that meets athletes' needs, supports their goals, and nurtures their love for the sport, USA Swimming can increase long-term participation and secure a bright future for swimming in the United States.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Parent Focus Group Questions



1. What initially brought your athlete to the sport of swimming?
- 2.. What experiences in your program are doing well to support athletes in competitive swimming?
3. What role does the parent have in helping their athlete enjoy the training involved in competitive swimming? What resources do you use to learn how to support your swimmer's competitive goals?
4. What challenges do you see that may cause 9–14-year athletes to quit competitive swimming?
- 5.. If applicable, what are the top reasons your family has left a youth sports activity (can be any activity)?
6. Are there unique considerations particular to the sport of swimming?
7. What are the top reasons your family has chosen to continue to participate in the sport of swimming?
8. What do you think USA Swimming can do to promote youth retention in sports?

Appendix B: Online Coaches' Survey

Questions 1 - 5 (Part I) were asked of each survey participant. Participants were then directed to a new page, based on their response to their primary governing body, to answer nine additional questions. These questions, as seen in Part II below (Questions 1-9) were the same for each participant, regardless of the primary governing body, and if they worked with multiple organizations, they were asked these questions for each organization.

ASCA Fellows Coaches Survey: Athlete Membership

Part I

* Indicates a required question

- 1) Please provide your preferred email here for future research purposes.
- 2) Name (short answer)
- 3) Role (Head Coach, assistant, volunteer, other) * (short answer)
- 4) Years coaching*
 - a) 0-5
 - b) 6-10
 - c) 11-15
 - d) 15+
- 5) Team or Club Name (short answer)
- 6) LSC (short answer)
- 7) What is your organization's primary governing body? *Choose multiple*
 - e) USA
 - f) YMCA
 - g) AAU
 - h) Recreation
 - i) High School
 - j) College

Part II

- 1) What is your team's annual retention?***
 - a) < 50 %
 - b) 51 - 60 %
 - c) 61 - 70%
 - d) 71 - 80 %
 - e) 81 - 90%
 - f) 91 - 95 %
 - g) Unsure

- 2) If you do have access to your retention numbers, how do you keep track (USA Swimming SWIMS 3.0, manually, other)**
 - a) USA Swimming SWIMS 3.0
 - b) Manually
 - c) Other:

- 3) At what age do you see most kids drop out of swimming?**
 - a) 10 & U
 - b) 11 - 12
 - c) 13 - 14
 - d) 15 - 16
 - e) 17 - 18
 - f) College
 - g) Post College

- 4) Who has the most impact on swimmer retention? Select all that apply:**
 - a) Clubs
 - b) Coaches
 - c) Parents
 - d) Governing Bodies (USA Swimming, LSC)
 - e) Other:

5) Please choose the top 5 factors you feel contribute to athletes staying in swimming the most.

- a) Coaching Quality
- b) Team Culture
- c) Personal progress
- d) Facilities
- e) Parent support
- f) Passion
- g) Costs
- h) Opportunities for Competition
- i) Physical Benefits
- j) Mental Benefits
- k) Other

6) Please choose the top 5 factors you feel contribute most to athletes leaving swimming.

- a) Coaching Quality
- b) Team Culture
- c) Poor Communication
- d) Costs
- e) Lack of Progress
- f) Inadequate Facilities
- g) Lack of Competition
- h) Physical Health
- i) Mental Health
- j) Interest Changes
- k) Schedule Conflicts
- l) Parents
- m) Graduation

7) Do you conduct an exit survey when athletes/families leave your team?

- a) Yes
- b) Yes, but not consistently
- c) No
- d) Don't know

8) Would you like a customizable exit survey to help your staff better understand why swimmers stay or leave your team?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Don't know

- 9) Do we have your permission to contact you in the future for research purposes? Please provide your email address if you are open to us contacting you.**

Appendix C: Online Coaches' Survey Data

Organization where respondents worked

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
USA Swimming	206	80.2
YMCA	14	5.4
AAU	2	0.8
Recreation League	2	0.8
High School	21	8.2
College	12	4.7
No Response	0	0.0

Position of All Respondents

Primary Position	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Head Coach	149	58.0
Head Age Group Coach	36	14.0
Lead Coach	18	7.0
Assistant Coach	46	17.9
Senior Age Group Coach	4	1.6
Volunteer Coach	4	1.6

Swim Coaching Experience of All Respondents

All Respondents Years Coaching	Number (N)	Percent (%)
0 – 5 Years	30	11.75
6 – 10 Years	59	23.0
11 – 15 Years	39	15.2
16 or More Years	129	50.2

Swim Coaching Experience of USA Swimming Respondents

USA Swimming Years Coaching	Number (N)	Percent (%)
0 – 5 Years	24	10.8
6 – 10 Years	51	22.8
11 – 15 Years	36	16.1
16 or More Years	113	50.4

Number of swim organizations respondents worked

Number of Organizations	Number (N)	Percent (%)
With One Organization	207	80.5
With Two Organizations	49	19.1
With Three Organizations	1	0.4

All Tracking Systems Used by All Respondents

Number of Tracking Systems	Number (N)	Percent (%)
One Tracking System	116	37.9
Two or More Tracking Systems	138	45.1
No Response	52	17

All Tracking Systems Used by USA Swimming Coaches

Number of Tracking Systems	Number (N)	Percent (%)
One Tracking System	73	32.6
Two or More Tracking Systems	108	48.2
No Response	43	19.2

Retention Rate Reported from All Respondents

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
> 95%	22	7.1
91 - 95%	40	13.0
81 - 90%	68	22.1
71 - 80%	72	23.4
61 - 70%	23	7.5
51 - 60%	11	3.6
<50%	6	1.9
Unsure	49	15.9
No Response	17	5.5

Retention Rate Reported from USA Swimming Respondents

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
> 95%	10	4.5
91 - 95%	25	11.2
81 - 90%	55	24.6
71 - 80%	56	25.0
61 - 70%	19	8.5
51 - 60%	8	3.6
<50%	3	1.3
Unsure	44	19.6
No Response	4	1.8

Primary Age of Dropout from Swimming from All Respondents

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
10 years & Under	39	12.7
11 – 12 years	48	15.6
13 – 14 years	105	34.1
15 – 16 years	42	13.6
17 – 18 years	27	8.8
College	22	7.1
Post College	7	2.3
No Response	18	5.8

Primary Age of Dropout from Swimming from USA Swimming

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
10 years & Under	36	16.1
11 – 12 years	42	18.8
13 – 14 years	88	39.3
15 – 16 years	28	12.5
17 – 18 years	16	7.1
College	10	4.5
Post College	4	1.8
No Response	0	0.0

Response Regarding if Organization Conducts a Survey for All Respondents

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Yes	37	12.0
Sometimes	75	24.4
No	150	48.7
Unsure	27	8.8
No Response	19	6.2

Response Regarding if Organization Conducts a Survey for USA Swimming

Response	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Yes	23	10.3
Sometimes	59	26.3
No	115	51.3
Unsure	25	11.2
No Response	2	0.9

Response Regarding if Organization Wants a Survey for All Respondents

All Respondents Wants an Exit Survey	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Yes	129	42.2
Maybe	102	33.3
No	57	18.6
No Response	18	5.9

Response Regarding if Organization Wants a Survey for USA Swimming

USA Swimming Wants an Exit Survey	Number (N)	Percent (%)
Yes	97	43.7
Maybe	82	36.9
No	42	18.9
No Response	1	0.5

Appendix D: Sample Exit Survey for Club Teams

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey so that we can provide the best experience possible for your child. This survey is anonymous, unless you want us to contact you specifically to address a concern. There is a place at the end for contact information. Please identify which age group your swimmer participated in:

*Please place an (X) by the team, if you have more than one swimmer with different coaches please complete a survey for **each** swimmer*

Select Group

- 8 & under age group
- 9-10 age group
- 11-12 age group
- 13-14 age group
- 15-18 age group

Please place an (X) by the team, if you have more than one swimmer with different coaches please complete a survey for each swimmer

1. How satisfied are you with the current fees for our swim team?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

2. How satisfied are you with the scheduled practice times?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

3. How satisfied are you with the conditions of the pool?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

4. How satisfied are you with the communication?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

Coaching - Did the coach...

5. Demonstrate thorough knowledge of the sport?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied

- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

6. Encourage a positive environment of sportsmanship?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

7. Consistently presents himself or herself in a professional manner?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

8. Educates the parents on swimming?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

9. Communicate with parents clearly and effectively?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

10. Demonstrate an approachable, cooperative, working spirit with parents?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

11. Handle parent's complaints in professional manner?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

Overall

12. What do you like most about the swim team program?

13. What do you like least about the swim team program?

14. Anything else you would like to share?

15. Overall how satisfied are you with the swim team?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments (please specify)

OPTIONAL

If you want direct contact to address any concerns:

Name:

Contact #:

What is the desired time of day, that we may contact you?

Appendix E: Sample Exit Survey for USA Swimming

1. How many total years have you been a member of USA Swimming?

- 0-1 years
- 2-4 years
- 5-7 years
- 8-10 years
- 11+ years

2. Do you renew your USA Swimming membership every year or do you skip some years?

- Every year
- Skip years

3. What are your reasons for not renewing your USA Swimming membership every year? Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

- I am too busy with school/other activities
- I want to focus on another sport
- I have an injury or health issues
- I want to take a mental break from swimming
- I do not feel the membership is worth the price
- Other (please specify)

4. Please rate your level of interest in the following annual membership registration options. (1-5 scale from Not At All Interested to Highly Interested)

Automated year-to-year renewal _____

Multi-year USA Swimming membership option _____

Lifetime USA Swimming membership option _____

Keep the annual membership as is _____

5. Describe yourself as a swimmer. Please select all that apply.

- Competitive pool swimmer - I usually compete in swim meets
- Open water swimmer - I usually compete in open water events
- Fitness swimmer - I swim for fitness but do not compete

6. USA Swimming would like to help you reach your swimming goals. Please rate your level of interest in the following programs. (1-5 scale from Not At All Interested to Very Interested)

Tracking of time improvements with potential for recognition _____

Online support community for swimmers with like-minded goals _____

Customized online swimming plans to meet your goals _____

Dryland training programs and information _____

7. Please estimate the number of times per year you purchase the following swim gear:

Swimsuits _____

Goggles _____

Swim caps _____

Towels _____

Fins/paddles/kickboards _____

8. I am more likely to buy swim gear or apparel from a company that is a sponsor or partner of USA Swimming. (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) _____

9. Does your swim club have a coach?

Yes

No

10. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement about your coach. (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

Our coach is willing to help swimmers on our team _____

Our coach gives swimmers individual attention _____

Our coach knows each swimmer's needs _____

Our coach is skilled at coaching _____

Our coach is respectful of swimmers on the team _____

11. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements about why you swim. (1-5 scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

Swimming makes me feel good _____

I enjoy swimming _____

I want to stay in shape _____

I swim to improve my skills _____

I like the social aspects of the swim team _____

I like to compete against other swimmers _____

I only join USA Swimming to compete in meets _____

12. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

13. What is your age?

- Under 10 years
- 10-12 years
- 13-14 years
- 15-18 years
- 19+ years

14. In what other sports/activities do you participate? Check all that apply.

15. What LSC (Local Swimming Committee) is your club part of?

16. Please share anything else you'd like us to know to help improve as a governing body for all swimmers.