



Catching Z's & Shooting Shots: CHANGING THE CULTURE OF SLEEP AT ST. THOMAS

by Cassidy Clevenger

Pulling all-nighters seems to be considered a rite of passage for many college students, and athletes are certainly no exception. These students are caught in a continuous cycle of practice, class, studying, games, conditioning, and maybe—just maybe—cram in some time for socializing; therefore, sadly, the priority of sleep tends to take a backseat for many students. Knowing

this, St. Thomas established their sleep center in 2016, and have been assessing the quality of sleep for their students, as well as providing individualized care plans for improving their sleep. In addition to personal, behavioral changes students can make, there are also adaptations colleges can do to promote better rest and improved performances by their students.



Meet the Players

Dr. Roxanne Prichard, scientific director of the Center for College Sleep at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Birdie Cunningham, St. Thomas' wellness director, have worked tirelessly on studying the effects of sleep on college students' and athletes' wellbeing. Their mission is to change the cultural outlook on sleep and educate their students on the importance of being properly rested.

Back in 2009, Cunningham noticed while reviewing a campus-wide health study that along with academic pressures and financial concerns, sleep was the third largest stressor students faced. She then reached out to Prichard, and the two began their mission for a cultural shift. The two collaborated with a medley of professors across disciplines, such as economics and psychology, and have used their research in assessment, implementations, and health promotions across campus. The team looks at factors at both personal and community levels, in an attempt to paint a holistic picture of stressors individual students are facing on a day-to-day (or night-to-night) basis.

Additionally, in 2017 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) convened an Interassociation Task Force on Sleep and Wellness, which is comprised of a group of experts in the fields of sleep research, sports medicine, mental health, along with college athletes and coaches. Through their research, the NCAA was able to design a consensus of recommendations colleges can apply toward their student athletes.

Sleep and Health

Depriving the body of sleep has major effects both on physical and mental fatigue. According to the NCAA, those who have chronic sleep problems are ten-times more likely to show depressive and anxious symptoms. In turn, addressing sleep issues is often among the first treatments for those living with anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder. Furthermore, when someone is rested, they have improved emotional resilience and problem solving skills. So while sleep is not a cure-all, Prichard does note that being rested does make someone primed to handle stress more effectively.

For first year students, poor sleep management is a greater predictor in course withdrawal than binge drinking. In knowing how vulnerable first year students are to poor sleep, St. Thomas includes information and tips that can help promote healthy sleeping behaviors starting as early as freshman orientation. Prichard expressed the importance of establishing a culture where valuing sleep is a social norm across campus.

In addition to affecting mental health, sleep has dramatic effects on physical performances. According to a Stanford study conducted in 2011 on sleep and student athletes, increasing the students' sleep by two hours a night improved their free throws by 11%, their 3-point shots by nearly 14%, and shaved almost a full second off their 282-foot sprints. Alternatively, athletes who were chronically sleep deprived were more susceptible to injury.

Myths About Sleep

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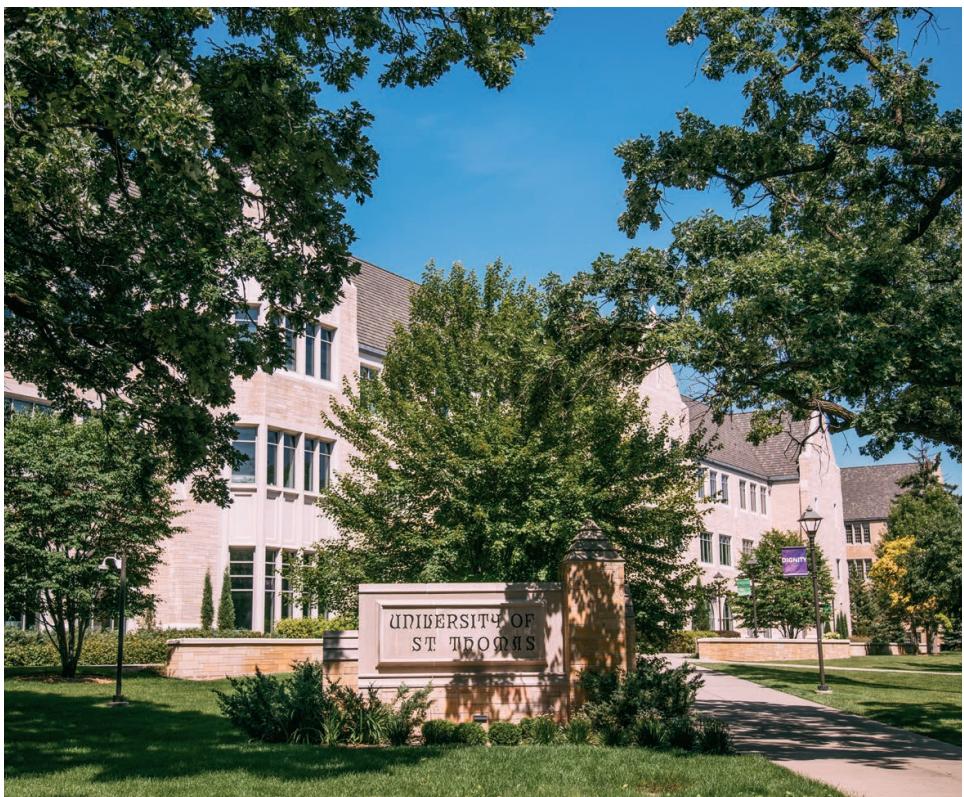
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sleeping schedule; while it may be tempting to try and salvage a couple of extra hours in bed on a Saturday morning, for the sake of optimizing mental and physical health, it is much better to go to bed earlier and keep to a regular schedule. In fact, having irregular sleep patterns is a large contributor to developing insomnia. “Catching up on sleep” is a misnomer, because once sleep is lost, it is virtually impossible to get it back.

That said, a good nap is nothing to besmirch. For college athletes, taking naps can improve their physical and cognitive performances. Knowing this, St. Thomas allows a space where athletes can take a brief nap. Key word here being *brief*—no more than thirty minutes.

Finally, over-the-counter sleeping aids are not an ideal substitute for proper sleep. Many of these medications are harsh on the liver, and can exacerbate insomnia. Additionally, FDA regulations have no bearing on these supplements, and are therefore poorly regulated and studied. Instead, if sleep problems persist, a better alternative may be behavioral and psychological treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).



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A photograph of the interior of the Lithgow Library at the University of St. Thomas. The room is filled with wooden study carrels and tables. The ceiling is made of light-colored wood planks, and several circular pendant lights are hanging from the ceiling. In the background, bookshelves are visible.

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A photograph showing several rolls of different types of mats. There are black and grey textured mats, as well as a blue mat. They are placed on a red carpet. In the background, there are shelves in a warehouse setting.

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Sleep and Nutrition

Poor sleeping also has massive impacts on eating patterns for students. Prichard noted that when students stay up late enough to become hungry for second-dinner, they can consume roughly an additional 900 calories. This is in-part related to availability—late at night, there are simply fewer food options. Another aspect is the types of foods students want at night; seldom do they crave a light kale salad as a midnight snack. More often than not, these students are eating calorically-dense and nutritionally-deficient foods. In an attempt to help students adhere to a consistent sleeping and waking schedule, Prichard and Cunningham have successfully persuaded the campus dining halls to open earlier on the weekends, which allows students to stick to their normal weekday routine.

Changes Colleges Can Make

One key aspect that can help student athletes get enough sleep is simply establishing a dialogue between coaches and athletes. By allowing a platform for conversation, coaches can be made aware of their students' sleep problems, which can then result in coaches modifying team training schedules. However, if adaptations cannot be made regarding start times, once student athletes are

A photograph of a band performing in a room. Four musicians are visible: two guitarists on the left, a drummer in the center, and a lead singer on the right. A large roll of black Super SAM 125 sound abatement membrane is in the foreground. Text overlay: "With SUPER SAM® 125 your neighbors aren't that LOUD". NAC logo: "N A C Products Free CONCRETE".

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aware of their obligations, they can make changes, such as earlier bedtimes and scheduled nap times, in order to combat the early morning trainings.

It may come as no surprise that dorm rooms are noisy and generally difficult places to get proper rest. This is why St. Thomas provides information about products that may be helpful. Such products include: white noise machines, sleep masks, essential oil diffusers, and ear plugs. Additionally, St. Thomas has also been pioneering university dorm modifications that can aid in better sleep. Amenities like blackout curtains and bedside lamps can make a difference in both falling and staying asleep. For example, by using personal lamps, one person can still study without affecting his/her roommate.

Finally, Prichard encourages colleges to reevaluate mandatory 8:00 classes for young students. Though some students do work well early in the morning, many students simply do not function optimally this early. This is why it is critical for colleges to offer mandatory classes at different points during the day, so all students can find classes that work best for their minds, bodies, and schedules.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer.

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