

# Recreation for Wellbeing 2025

## *Course Resource Guide*

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# Inter-association Definition of Well-being

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[nirsa.org/hands-in](http://nirsa.org/hands-in)

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## Purpose & Background

*Health and Well-being in Higher Education:* A Commitment to Student Success commits to innovating, supporting, and fostering a holistic, integrated, and strategic approach to well-being from the association level to the institutional level. In our pursuit to co-create cultures of integrated well-being on campuses worldwide, we want to ensure we are building from a shared understanding and foundation. Since there was not an existing definition that defined well-being, especially as it applies to higher education, the members of our organizations asked that one be created.

To this end, we have worked together — as a community of experts from across our respective fields — to review the many existing well-being theories and to adapt those theories

and language into an overarching definition of well-being for higher education. This definition, and its supplementary material, is meant to be foundational; we hope a shared understanding can be a stepping stone to systemic change. This document is, of course, not exhaustive, and it does not intend to mean all things to all organizations or specialty areas; rather, the goal is to be widely usable. Our definition is tailored to inform programming, policies, and practices in support of well-being in higher education settings. Additionally, we acknowledge that well-being is not solely a place-based concept. An opportunity exists for us to consider well-being more broadly in a plurality of higher education contexts, including the online environment. In this manner, connectedness to the institution is an overarching sense that students take with them wherever they go.

## Simple definition

We define well-being as an optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential.

## Expanded definition

We define well-being as an optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential. Our focus is on two interdependent types of well-being: 1) individual and 2) community. **Individual well-being** is defined within three broad and interrelated categories: (a) the perceived assessment of one's own life as being generally happy and satisfying, (b) having one's human rights and needs met, and (c) one's contribution to the community. **Community well-being** is defined by relationships and connectedness, perceived quality of life for all people in the community, and how well the community meets the needs of all members. By focusing on the whole — the whole person, the whole educational experience, the whole institution, the whole community — well-being becomes a multifaceted goal and a shared responsibility for the entire institution.

## Individual well-being

Individual well-being is more explicitly defined by three interrelated components – subjective well-being, objective well-being, and civic well-being. Table 1 presents the definitional and contributing factors by individual well-being component.

1. **Subjective well-being** is expressed when people feel good and think their lives are good; they would rank themselves high on measures of happiness and life satisfaction and low on measures of negative mood. The affective (e.g., feeling good) and cognitive (e.g., thinking life is good) aspects of subjective well-being can move independently from one another.
2. **Objective well-being** is realized when people have their basic human rights and needs met. Objective well-being includes but is not limited to: sufficient resources such as food, housing, safety, and physical/mental health care; experiences of systemic equity and diversity; experiences of liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society; and experiences of unfettered human rights such as freedom of speech, voting access, and justice system protections.
3. **Civic well-being** is demonstrated by acting on community-supportive values and contributing to the communities in which they live. These communities may include institution, local, state, national, and global communities. Recognizing their own value and impact on the whole community, they actively participate in at least one behavior that benefits others. Additionally, they reject biased and prejudicial beliefs, and work within communities that are anti-racist and established to address and overcome social injustice. In other words, they act in support of the subjective and objective well-being of others, rather than detracting from it.

## Community well-being

Community well-being is similarly defined by two interrelated components – subjective well-being and objective well-being. Although a community cannot be well if its members are not well, community well-being mainly refers to the structures, systems, and normative behavior of the community rather than the sum of individual well-being. Individuals striving for well-being need communities of well-being to engage fully in this pursuit. Table 2 presents the definitional and contributing factors by community well-being component.

1. **Subjective community well-being** is a collective perception expressed by groups of people regarding their shared sense of community and satisfaction with community life. Additionally, people perceive that the overall quality of life is good and just for all community members regardless of differences across individual identities.
2. **Objective community well-being** is an externally verifiable measure of the structures, systems, practices, values, and normative behaviors that contribute to sufficient and equitable opportunities, resources, conditions, and other socio-ecological factors that make a particular community setting more conducive to the achievement of full potential beyond what is possible for a single individual. It is also important to recognize that institutions of higher education are embedded in a larger society and are dependent on the well-being of the ecosystems of the planet.

**Table 1. Definitional and Contributing Factors by Individual Well-Being Component**

<b>Definitional Factors</b>		<b>Contributing Factors:</b> What are the necessary skills, resources, and conditions?
<b>Subjective</b>	<p>Feeling happy</p> <p>Life satisfaction</p> <p>Self-esteem</p> <p>Feeling hopeful/content</p> <p>Feeling calm/at peace</p> <p>Limited experience of negative moods</p>	<p>Healthy coping and stress management skills</p> <p>Optimism</p> <p>Appropriate/healthy skepticism</p> <p>Meaning</p> <p>Purpose</p> <p>Belonging</p> <p>Engagement in activities and academics</p> <p>Social support networks</p> <p>Achievement</p> <p>Mastery</p> <p>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, resources, and spaces</p> <p>Faculty and staff who design curriculum and programs with these factors in mind</p> <p>Faculty and staff who model these factors</p>
<b>Objective</b>	<p>Sufficient resources such as food, housing, safety, and physical/mental health care</p> <p>Experiences of systemic equity and diversity</p> <p>Experiences of liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society</p> <p>Experiences of unfettered human rights such as freedom of speech, voting access, and justice system protections.</p>	<p>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, and resources (see Community Well-being)</p>
<b>Civic</b>	<p>Valuing doing good for others</p> <p>Valuing political engagement</p> <p>Valuing humanitarian rights</p> <p>Valuing volunteering</p> <p>Being connected to others regardless of identity</p> <p>Engaging in political activism</p> <p>Engaging in environmentally-friendly practices</p> <p>Valuing well-being for yourself and others</p>	<p>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, and resources</p> <p>Faculty and staff who teach about these things</p> <p>Faculty and staff who model these things</p> <p>School-supported opportunities to engage civically</p>

**Table 2. Definitional and Contributing Factors by Community Well-Being Component**

	<b>Definitional Factors</b>	<b>Contributing Factors:</b> What are the necessary skills, resources, and conditions?
<b>Subjective</b>	Equity Sense of community Collective efficacy Social capital Place and planet Satisfaction with the community	Respect, fairness, and justice for all Equal opportunity to achieve full potential Resilience and empowerment Interpersonal relationships Shared emotional connection Shared sense of identity Belonging Influence Trust Cooperation, co-creation, and reciprocity Integration and fulfillment of needs Leadership of beneficence, integrity, competence, and vision Satisfaction with the institution Institutional pride
<b>Objective</b>	Safety Accessible, secure sources of food and housing Accessible health-supporting services Accessible culture and arts Accessible recreation and leisure opportunities Systemic equity Systemic diversity Liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society Unfettered human rights Environmental quality and ecosystem stability Sustainability Economics Infrastructure/buildings	Supportive policies, practices, and norms Supportive campus expectations and norms Sufficient resources and allocation of resources on campus Fair and equitable distribution of resources on campus Available helping relationships Procedures and practices that facilitate sense of community, relationships, and social connection “Green spaces” and good air quality Biophilic design

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## Module 01 | Foundations of Wellbeing & Systems Thinking

### Learning Outcomes

- Articulate the concept of wellbeing and understand its distinction from wellness
- Explain the components of the inter-association definition of wellbeing
- Articulate what it means to take a systems and settings approach to your work

### Module 01 | Suggested Readings

Before you start module 01, we suggest reviewing the following resources:

- [Health and Well-being in Higher Education: Commitment to Student Success](#)
- [Inter-association Definition of Well-being](#)
- [Okanagan Charter](#)
- [Increasing Physical Activity Using An Ecological Model](#)

### Module 01 | Connecting to the Framework Activity

Now that you have completed Module 1 and have a better understanding of the Inter-association Definition of Well-being, we would like you to connect it back to your work. In this activity, you will think through ways in which your daily work contributes to wellbeing through the lens of this definition. Note that there may be multiple levels to think about depending on your role. Consider your work with participants, student employees, graduate assistants, professional staff, colleagues, etc.

Don't get stuck on finding the 'right' or 'best' answer; the goal is to get comfortable with thinking differently. You may find some components more challenging to connect your work to than others; if that's the case, consider listing some questions instead. You may notice that some ideas could align with multiple components. At this stage, it is more important to recognize how your work contributes to wellbeing overall, and it's less important to label it in the 'right' column.

Below you will find brief examples to get you started. The first two outline how this tool could be utilized when examining an area as a whole, whereas the third example approaches the inter-association definition in terms of a specific program.

Following these examples there is a blank chart for you to use to begin to connect the components of the inter-association definition either to your area as a whole, or to a specific aspect of your role. List as many things as you can think of and, if needed, add more lines.

### Example 1: Outdoor Adventures Program

Individual			Community	
Subjective	Objective	Civic	Subjective	Objective
Give students the opportunity to learn new skills, explore local areas, and create a sense of belonging and play.	Provide opportunities for student employees to earn money for food, housing, etc.	Encourage and practice inclusive language in all programming.	Offer regular inclusive climbing wall events/ space to create a sense of community.	Build relationships with relevant academic departments and local parks and recreation initiatives/ venues for ongoing partnerships.
Leadership roles for students to gain interpersonal skills. Empower students through trips, climbing and challenge programming.	Provide training to ensure safe programs and equipment, train staff to cook inclusive meals for all diets.	Professional and student staff are trained in and promote environmentally-conscious practices.	Work with non-traditional participants to identify opportunities that would be meaningful for them.	Consider the benefits of the full outdoor community (students, staff, and local resources).

### Example 2: Business Services

Individual			Community	
Subjective	Objective	Civic	Subjective	Objective
Provide training to students for transferable skills and department onboarding.	Provide safe, inclusive environments in student work stations. Deliver a welcoming onboarding experience for all staff.	Participate in the annual food drive for the Food Pantry.	Focus on inclusivity and wellbeing in our staff recruitment and hiring/ training, as well as our communications and marketing.	Ensure appropriate budget management to meet the needs of the department.
Create opportunities for student recognition and promotion.	Support all department staff with inclusive hiring practices and welcoming onboarding for all staff.	Discuss how our work impacts the efforts of the rest of the department.	Review recruitment and hiring practices for bias.	What policies could we examine? What would we be looking for? How do I know I'm not making a change just because?

### Example 3: IM Sports Tournament

Individual			Community	
Subjective	Objective	Civic	Subjective	Objective
Teams provide sense of belonging for individual players  HS soccer players get to continue to pursue a meaningful passion in college  Practices and games are outlet for stress	Safety: Clear concussion protocols; EMT on site  Finances: Hardship waiver for entry fees to minimize financial barriers	Sporting behavior awards celebrated after each game  Tournament norm/ expectation that teams cheer for other games when they're not playing	Fairness: Real-time feedback and response opportunities for players and staff  Strong community support and presence	Inclusive, accessible, frequently revised participation policies  Field fertilizer uses minimal chemicals and incorporates campus compost, e.g. coffee grounds

This table comes from Module 1; refer back to the recording for further context, if needed.

**Your Turn!**

Individual			Community	
Subjective	Objective	Civic	Subjective	Objective

## Module 01 | Reflection Questions:

- ★ After completing the Connecting to the Framework Activity, what component(s) of the inter-association definition did you find most challenging to connect to your work?
- ★ Thinking back to the systems thinking content delivered at the end of Module 1, what is one thing you are trying to accomplish as it relates to your specific role? What is one problem you are currently trying to solve? Will the problem you are trying to solve make a significant impact on what you are trying to accomplish?
- ★ How do you believe your work in higher education, specifically recreation, contributes to wellbeing?

## Module 02 | Applying Systems Thinking to Impact Wellbeing

### Learning Outcomes

- Explain at least one way that wellbeing is supported through recreation
- Identify levers of systemic change for wellbeing
- Apply the principles of systems thinking into your daily work – no matter your role - to impact wellbeing

### Module 02 | Suggested Readings

Before you start Module 02, we suggest reviewing the following resources.

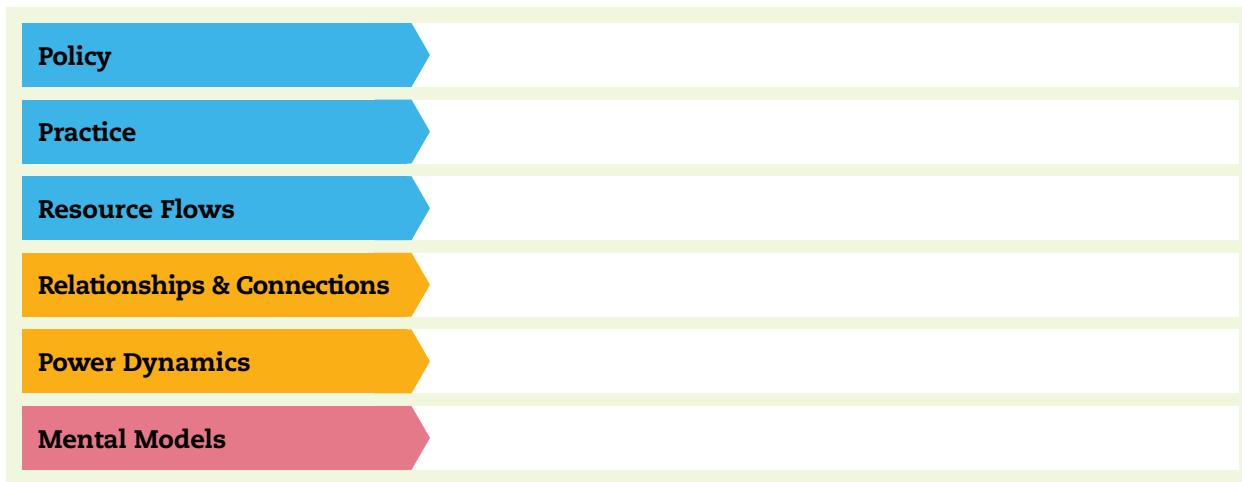
- [The Dawn of System Leadership \(ssir.org\)](#)
- [Pursuing Transformational Change for Better Student well-being](#)
  - See also: [Learnings and tools for transformational change and student wellbeing](#)
- [Collective Impact](#)
  - See also: [Centering Equity in Collective Impact](#)
- [Tools of a Systems Thinker](#)
- [Improvement Discipline in Practice](#)

### Module 02 | Connecting to the Framework Activity

Now that you have completed Module 2 and have a better understanding of systems and their six conditions of change, we would like you to connect it back to a specific system you work within. In this activity, you will connect more deeply to the systems you impact the most.

Refer back to the examples of the six conditions provided in Module 2, then use the blank chart below to outline your thoughts. Think through the following questions as you brainstorm:

- What **policies** do you have control over?
- What **practices** or standards do you have control over?
- What **resources** are needed to support the experience you are trying to create?
- What **relationships** could be established, strengthened, or clarified to support the desired goal?
- Who holds **power** to change parts of the process?
- Is there a shared understanding/belief among others within your system? (i.e. team, organization, campus, etc.) What common assumptions exist?



## Module 02 | Reflection Questions:

- ★ Refer back to your answer from the second reflection question after Module 1. (When thinking of your specific role, what are you trying to accomplish?)

Is this an output or outcome driven approach? If it is output driven, what is one change you could make in your thinking to shift to an outcome driven approach?

- ★ Begin to brainstorm some policies, practices, and norms that play a part in how you do your work. What would it look like to evolve them? What impact would that have? Who would it impact?

## Continue the Journey | Post-Course Actions & Next Steps

### Final Reflection Questions

- ★ Reflect back on what you have learned and your experience in the course. As we know, this work is never-ending; with that in mind, what area(s) do you still have questions on and/or would like additional learning on as you continue this work?
- ★ Where can you go to share your story and learnings with others? Who is someone you can network with to continue the journey of growing and evolving our wellbeing impact?

### Take Action!

Begin to brainstorm an idea for a specific action you could take on your campus, in your organization, etc. to impact change. Referring back to the 3-Part Approach to Systems Thinking, outlined in Module 2, begin to outline this idea in more detail.

Part 1: Outcomes	Part 2: System	Part 3: Knowledge
What are you hoping to accomplish?  What is the problem you are trying to solve?	What system are you trying to impact?  What are the different aspects of the system you are trying to impact?  Where are you within that system?	What do you know?  How do you know it?  How will we know that a change is an improvement?
Part 1: Outcomes	Part 2: System	Part 3: Knowledge

## “Bonus Module” Suggested Readings

A previous iteration of this course featured a look at how data and research support the connection between recreation, wellness, and wellbeing. In this iteration of the course, that presentation can be accessed as a “bonus module.” Below are the suggested readings that were originally paired with that presentation.

- [Building Sense of Belonging through Informal Recreation Participation](#)
- [Informal Recreations Relationship with College Students Stress and Anxiety](#)
- [Outdoor Campus Recreation, Well-Being, and the Intersectionality of Constraints](#)