

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH FRAMEWORK & TOOLS

NIRSA Core Competencies Workbook

Reflect on your practice.
Build a development plan.
Grow your impact.





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SECTION 1

Why the NIRSA Core Competencies Matter

Campus recreation professionals do far more than manage facilities, run programs, and supervise staff.

Every day, professionals across the field help students find belonging, develop leadership skills, improve wellbeing, build community, and connect with their institutions in meaningful ways. They navigate risk, manage resources, lead teams, solve problems, build partnerships, and contribute to student success.

Yet many of the most important aspects of the work can be difficult to describe.

- What makes someone effective in campus recreation?
- What skills help professionals grow from supervising a student staff member to leading a department?
- How can professionals identify their strengths and intentionally develop new capabilities?

The NIRSA Core Competencies were designed to answer those questions.

The framework provides a shared language for the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that support success across the profession. It helps professionals understand what effective practice looks like, identify opportunities for growth, and build a roadmap for continued development throughout their careers.

Most importantly, the competencies are not intended to be a checklist.
They are a tool for reflection, growth, coaching, and conversation.

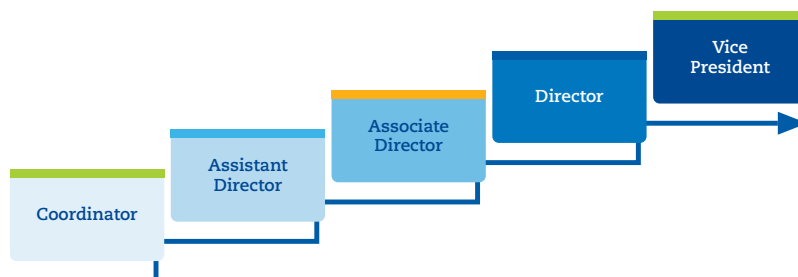
Whether you are entering the profession, leading a functional area, or serving as a senior leader, the competencies can help you understand where you are today and where you want to go next.

A Different Way to Think About Career Growth

Many professions define advancement through titles.

The reality is *rarely that simple*.

Some professionals become exceptional supervisors long before they manage a large budget. Others may lead complex operations while still developing confidence in conflict management or strategic communication.



Growth does not happen all at once.

It happens one skill, one experience, and one challenge at a time.

That is why the NIRSA Core Competencies focus on capabilities rather than positions.

Instead of asking:

“What title do I have?”

The framework encourages us to ask:

“What am I learning?”

“What responsibilities am I taking on?”

“How is my impact expanding?”

The competencies recognize that growth is a journey, not a job title.

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Meet Jordan.

Jordan has recently accepted a position as Coordinator of Intramural Sports at a mid-sized university.

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, JORDAN MAY:

- Supervise student officials
- Respond to participant concerns
- Coordinate schedules
- Review incident reports
- Train student employees
- Collaborate with colleagues
- Support special events

Jordan is talented, motivated, and eager to grow. But Jordan sometimes wonders:

“What skills should I focus on next?”

“How will I know when I’m ready for more responsibility?”

“What does success look like beyond simply doing my current job well?”

Throughout this guidebook, we’ll follow Jordan’s professional journey and explore how the competencies can support growth at every stage of a career.

The Five Competency Domains

The NIRSA Core Competencies are organized into five domains or professional practice areas. Together, these domains represent the capabilities that support effective campus recreation practice regardless of institution size, functional area, or position title.

Operations

Operations focuses on delivering high-quality programs, services, and facility experiences. Professionals demonstrate operational excellence by planning effectively, managing logistics, solving problems, improving processes, and ensuring participants receive consistent, high-quality experiences.

Questions Operations helps answer:

- How effectively are programs and services delivered?
- How do we improve participant experiences?
- How do we create systems that support success?

Leadership

Leadership focuses on developing people and creating positive workplace cultures. Leadership is not limited to formal supervisors. Every professional has opportunities to influence others, build trust, foster inclusion, and support growth.

Questions Leadership helps answer:

- How do I help others succeed?
- How do I build accountability and trust?
- How do I contribute to a healthy team culture?

Risk & Resource Management

Campus recreation professionals are entrusted with people, facilities, finances, equipment, technology, and institutional resources. This domain focuses on stewardship. It includes safety, compliance, financial management, responsible resource use, ethical decision-making, and the growing responsibility associated with data, technology, and artificial intelligence.

Questions Risk & Resource Management helps answer:

- How do I protect participants and the institution?
- How do I use resources responsibly?
- How do I balance innovation and risk?

Communication

Communication is about more than sharing information. It includes collaboration, relationship building, conflict management, advocacy, emotional intelligence, and storytelling. As professionals advance, communication becomes increasingly important in building partnerships and influencing decisions.

Questions Communication helps answer:

- How do I build trust?
- How do I navigate difficult conversations?
- How do I help others understand the value of campus recreation?

Professionalism & Service

Professionalism & Service focuses on continuous learning, ethical practice, and contribution to the profession. The strongest professionals never stop learning. They seek new knowledge, share expertise with others, and help strengthen the profession for future generations.

Questions Professionalism & Service helps answer:

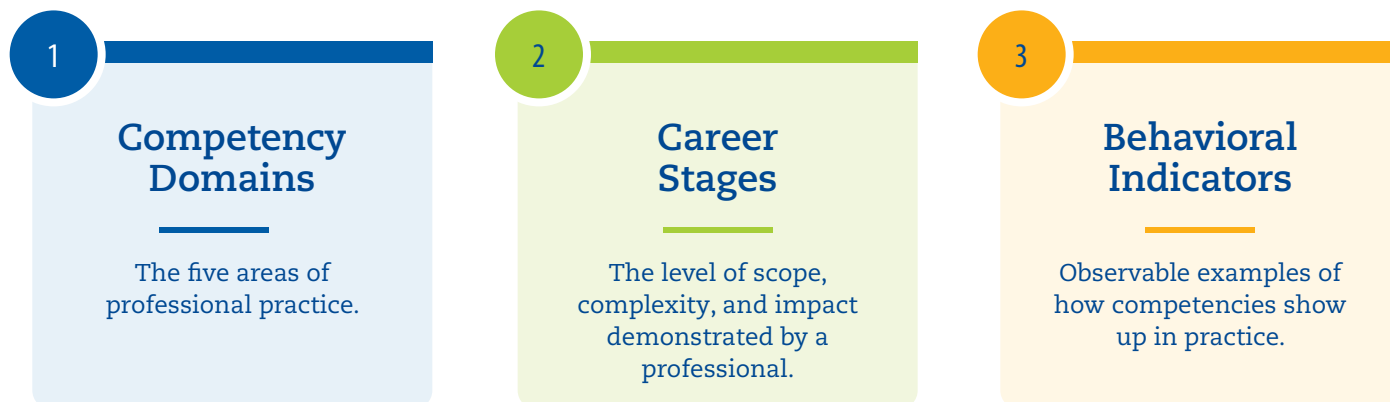
- How am I growing?
- How do I apply what I learn?
- How do I contribute to the profession beyond my own role?



The competencies work together. Growth in one area strengthens effectiveness in the others.

How the Framework Works

The framework combines three simple elements:



Together, these three elements create a roadmap for growth.

Career Stages at a Glance

EARLY CAREER Deliver & Apply Focuses primarily on delivering high-quality work within established systems.	MID-CAREER Lead & Deepen Focuses on leading programs, developing people, and improving systems.	SENIOR LEVEL Shape & Influence Focuses on strategy, organizational leadership, and institutional impact.
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A Competency Across Career Stages

One of the easiest ways to understand the framework is to watch a competency evolve across career stages.

Consider Operations.

EARLY CAREER

Implements programs, events, and facility operations according to established procedures and standards.

The focus is on delivering quality experiences and ensuring things run smoothly.

MID-CAREER

Designs and deepens operational processes based on assessment results and emerging needs.

The focus shifts from executing systems to deepening them.

SENIOR LEVEL

Develops and leads implementation of long-term strategic plans that advance institutional goals.

The focus expands from managing today's operations to shaping tomorrow's opportunities.

Notice the progression:



This pattern appears throughout the framework. As professionals grow, their impact expands from individual responsibilities to teams, programs, departments, and institutions.

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Jordan's Reflection

After reviewing the framework, Jordan realizes something important.

- Professional growth is not about checking boxes or racing toward the next title.
- It is about continuously expanding knowledge, skills, judgment, and influence.

For the first time, Jordan can clearly see how today's responsibilities connect to tomorrow's opportunities. And that makes the next step feel a little easier to navigate.

Looking Ahead

Now that you understand the structure of the framework, the next question becomes:

Where do I fit?

In the next section, we'll explore the three career stages and help you identify where you are today, where you want to grow, and what development looks like along the way.

SECTION 2

NIRSA **Competency Set**

CORE COMPETENCY SET

The Five Competency Domains

01

Operations

02

Leadership

03

Risk & Resource Management

04

Communication

05

Professionalism & Service

Operations



Early Career

DEFINITION

Delivers safe, organized, and high-quality programs, services, and facility operations aligned with departmental expectations.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Implements programs, events, and facility operations according to established procedures, timelines, and safety standards, identifying operational issues and taking appropriate action and escalating concerns promptly.

Coordinates schedules, staffing, and logistics to ensure smooth daily operations.

Collects and analyzes a variety of data to improve programs, services, and participant experience.

Supports operations across a range of functional areas (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, wellbeing, outdoor recreation, and sport offerings), demonstrating adaptability and understanding of how services connect.

Mid-Career

DEFINITION

Leads programs, services, or functional areas to achieve departmental goals through effective planning, coordination, and continuous improvement.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Designs or deepens operational processes based on assessment results or emerging needs.

Manages program or facility areas with responsibility for quality, efficiency, and participant experience.

Anticipates operational challenges, evaluates possible alternatives, and implements solutions that improve long-term effectiveness.

Leads or coordinates operations across multiple functional areas (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, etc), ensuring alignment, consistency, and effective service delivery.

Senior Level

DEFINITION

Establishes vision and long-term direction for programs, services, and operations aligned with institutional priorities and future needs.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Develops and leads implementation of multi-year strategic plans, including capital projects, that position campus recreation to advance institutional goals.

Allocates resources across programs or units based on data, trends, and long-term priorities.

Leads organizational change initiatives that improve effectiveness, sustainability, or impact.

Aligns and optimizes a portfolio of services (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, wellbeing, outdoor recreation, and sport offerings) to advance institutional priorities, participant needs, and long-term sustainability.

Leadership



Early Career

DEFINITION

Effectively supervises and supports student employees to promote learning, accountability, and positive workplace culture.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Models professionalism, accountability, and positive work ethic in daily interactions with student employees.

Supervises staff by communicating clearly and providing guidance or support while reinforcing policies, expectations, and professional standards.

Actively fosters an inclusive and positive team environment where others feel supported and valued.

Advocates for self and operational needs by communicating ideas, challenges, and improvement opportunities to supervisors or team members.

Mid-Career

DEFINITION

Leads and develops professional and student staff to build strong teams, accountability, and positive workplace culture.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Leads team management processes for professional, graduate, and student staff, including hiring, selection, interviewing, onboarding, coaching, performance feedback, and development planning.

Establishes team expectations and leads an inclusive and collaborative work environment across the functional area to support performance and accountability.

Identifies talent and operational needs, and leads staff development and team efforts to achieve unit or program outcomes.

Advocates for team or functional area priorities by communicating needs, challenges, and resource considerations to stakeholders and leadership.

Senior Level

DEFINITION

Builds leadership capacity and organizational culture through workforce strategy, succession planning, and leadership development.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Designs organizational structures and workforce strategies aligned with long-term departmental and institutional priorities.

Develops managers and senior staff to lead effectively, ensuring performance, accountability, and growth across teams.

Shapes organizational culture by reinforcing shared values, accountability, and inclusive leadership practices across the department.

Advocates for campus recreation's role and impact by using data, outcomes, and storytelling to influence institutional priorities and decisions.

Risk & Resource Management



Early Career

DEFINITION

Applies policies, procedures, and sound judgment to support participant safety, responsible resource use, and organizational compliance.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Follows and reinforces safety protocols, emergency procedures, and risk management practices.

Documents incidents accurately and communicates concerns through appropriate channels.

Recognizes potential safety, policy, or resource risks and takes preventative action within role authority.

Uses data, technology, and AI tools responsibly by following established policies, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring accuracy in information and reporting.

Uses resources (e.g., staffing, equipment, time) responsibly and identifies opportunities to improve efficiency or reduce waste.

Mid-Career

DEFINITION

Leads implementation of risk management and resource practices, ensuring compliance and effective use of financial, human, and operational resources.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Develops or updates policies, training practices, or procedures to mitigate operational risk and improve resource utilization.

Reviews incidents, data, or trends to improve safety practices, reduce risk exposure, and inform resource decisions.

Collaborates with campus partners (e.g., risk management, legal, facilities, athletics, finance, HR) to ensure compliance and effective resource alignment.

Applies ethical standards to the use of data, technology, and AI, ensuring accuracy, appropriate use, and compliance with institutional policies when informing decisions and operations.

Manages financial, human, and operational resources to support unit priorities and organizational effectiveness.

Senior Level

DEFINITION

Establishes organizational approaches to risk, legal, financial, and human resource stewardship that protect and advance the institution.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Sets organizational priorities for risk, compliance, and resource stewardship aligned with institutional frameworks and strategy.

Leads long-range financial and resource planning, including staffing models, capital investments, and revenue strategies.

Partners across institutional units (e.g., legal, finance, HR, facilities) to optimize resource use and mitigate risk across the enterprise.

Establishes and promotes ethical practices for the use of data, technology, and AI, guiding responsible governance, data integrity, and compliance with institutional and legal standards.

Balances innovation, risk, and resource allocation to ensure sustainability and institutional impact.

Early Career

DEFINITION

Communicates clearly and works effectively with colleagues, students, and campus partners to support shared goals.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Communicates relevant information clearly with staff, participants, and supervisors.

Uses available data or feedback to identify needs and suggest improvements within their area of responsibility.

Demonstrates self-awareness by managing emotions, responding professionally during challenges, and adjusting communication approach based on feedback, context, or situation.

Mid-Career

DEFINITION

Builds partnerships and aligns unit work with departmental and institutional priorities through effective communication and collaboration.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Represents the department in cross-campus initiatives or collaborative projects.

Analyzes data and advocates for program or functional area needs by communicating priorities, outcomes, and resource considerations to stakeholders.

Navigates conflict, differing perspectives, constructive feedback, and competing priorities by managing emotions, adapting communication style, and facilitating productive dialogue to support team and organizational goals.

Senior Level

DEFINITION

Advances institutional priorities and represents campus recreation through strategic partnerships, advocacy, and influence.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Builds and sustains partnerships with internal and external stakeholders to advance shared priorities.

Leverages data, outcomes, and institutional metrics—supported by appropriate tools and systems—to evaluate impact, inform decisions, and advocate for resources and strategic investment in campus recreation.

Models emotional intelligence and leads through complex or sensitive situations by managing conflict, adapting communication strategies, and fostering constructive dialogue across stakeholders.

Communicates and translates the impact of campus recreation through compelling storytelling that connects programs and services to measurable outcomes that advance student success, wellbeing, and institutional priorities.

Professionalism & Service



Early Career

DEFINITION

Demonstrates professionalism through continuous learning, ethical practice, and application of knowledge to improve individual performance.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Engages in ongoing professional learning (e.g., trainings, certifications, reading, workshops) and builds a professional network by actively participating and volunteering on campus, in community, and with professional organizations.

Applies relevant frameworks, policies, or best practices to inform decisions and day-to-day work.

Demonstrates professionalism by making ethical, appropriate decisions based on the situation and organizational expectations.

Mid-Career

DEFINITION

Advances team and organizational effectiveness by applying frameworks and supporting the development of others through continuous learning and professional practice.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Applies and shares frameworks, theories, and best practices to guide team and organizational decisions, while contributing to the field through committee work, leadership roles, and knowledge-sharing across campus, community, and professional organizations.

Supports the professional growth of staff by encouraging and facilitating ongoing learning opportunities (e.g., trainings, certifications, conferences).

Models professional judgment by selecting appropriate approaches based on context, complexity, and organizational priorities.

Senior Level

DEFINITION

Advances the profession by contributing knowledge, shaping practice, and promoting continuous learning and professional standards across the field.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

Contributes to the advancement of the profession through research, presentations, publications, or leadership in professional organizations, campus committees/projects, or in the community.

Promotes and supports a culture of continuous learning across the organization and profession.

Shapes professional practice by integrating emerging trends, research, and innovations, while contributing to professional advancement through research, presentations, mentorship, or association leadership.

Early Career COMPETENCY SET



Operations

DEFINITION

Delivers safe, organized, and high-quality programs, services, and facility operations aligned with departmental expectations.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Implements programs, events, and facility operations according to established procedures, timelines, and safety standards, identifying operational issues and taking appropriate action and escalating concerns promptly.
- Coordinates schedules, staffing, and logistics to ensure smooth daily operations.
- Collects and analyzes a variety of data to improve programs, services, and participant experience.
- Supports operations across a range of functional areas (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, wellbeing, outdoor recreation, and sport offerings), demonstrating adaptability and understanding of how services connect.

Leadership

DEFINITION

Effectively supervises and supports student employees to promote learning, accountability, and positive workplace culture.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Models professionalism, accountability, and positive work ethic in daily interactions with student employees.
- Supervises staff by communicating clearly and providing guidance or support while reinforcing policies, expectations, and professional standards.
- Actively fosters an inclusive and positive team environment where others feel supported and valued.
- Advocates for self and operational needs by communicating ideas, challenges, and improvement opportunities to supervisors or team members.

Risk & Resource Management

DEFINITION

Applies policies, procedures, and sound judgment to support participant safety, responsible resource use, and organizational compliance.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Follows and reinforces safety protocols, emergency procedures, and risk management practices.
- Documents incidents accurately and communicates concerns through appropriate channels.
- Recognizes potential safety, policy, or resource risks and takes preventative action within role authority.
- Uses data, technology, and AI tools responsibly by following established policies, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring accuracy in information and reporting.
- Uses resources (e.g., staffing, equipment, time) responsibly and identifies opportunities to improve efficiency or reduce waste.

Communication

DEFINITION

Communicates clearly and works effectively with colleagues, students, and campus partners to support shared goals.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Communicates relevant information clearly with staff, participants, and supervisors.
- Uses available data or feedback to identify needs and suggest improvements within their area of responsibility.
- Demonstrates self-awareness by managing emotions, responding professionally during challenges, and adjusting communication approach based on feedback, context, or situation.

Professionalism & Service

DEFINITION

Demonstrates professionalism through continuous learning, ethical practice, and application of knowledge to improve individual performance.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Engages in ongoing professional learning (e.g., trainings, certifications, reading, workshops) and builds a professional network by actively participating and volunteering on campus, in community, and with professional organizations.
- Applies relevant frameworks, policies, or best practices to inform decisions and day-to-day work.
- Demonstrates professionalism by making ethical, appropriate decisions based on the situation and organizational expectations.

Mid-Career COMPETENCY SET



Operations

DEFINITION

Leads programs, services, or functional areas to achieve departmental goals through effective planning, coordination, and continuous improvement.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Designs or deepens operational processes based on assessment results or emerging needs.
- Manages program or facility areas with responsibility for quality, efficiency, and participant experience.
- Anticipates operational challenges, evaluates possible alternatives, and implements solutions that improve long-term effectiveness.
- Leads or coordinates operations across multiple functional areas (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, etc), ensuring alignment, consistency, and effective service delivery.

Leadership

DEFINITION

Leads and develops professional and student staff to build strong teams, accountability, and positive workplace culture.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Leads team management processes for professional, graduate, and student staff, including hiring, selection, interviewing, onboarding, coaching, performance feedback, and development planning.
- Establishes team expectations and leads an inclusive and collaborative work environment across the functional area to support performance and accountability.
- Identifies talent and operational needs, and leads staff development and team efforts to achieve unit or program outcomes.
- Advocates for team or functional area priorities by communicating needs, challenges, and resource considerations to stakeholders and leadership.

Risk & Resource Management

DEFINITION

Leads implementation of risk management and resource practices, ensuring compliance and effective use of financial, human, and operational resources.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Develops or updates policies, training practices, or procedures to mitigate operational risk and improve resource utilization.
- Reviews incidents, data, or trends to improve safety practices, reduce risk exposure, and inform resource decisions.
- Collaborates with campus partners (e.g., risk management, legal, facilities, athletics, finance, HR) to ensure compliance and effective resource alignment.
- Applies ethical standards to the use of data, technology, and AI, ensuring accuracy, appropriate use, and compliance with institutional policies when informing decisions and operations.
- Manages financial, human, and operational resources to support unit priorities and organizational effectiveness.

Communication

DEFINITION

Builds partnerships and aligns unit work with departmental and institutional priorities through effective communication and collaboration.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Represents the department in cross-campus initiatives or collaborative projects.
- Analyzes data and advocates for program or functional area needs by communicating priorities, outcomes, and resource considerations to stakeholders.
- Navigates conflict, differing perspectives, constructive feedback, and competing priorities by managing emotions, adapting communication style, and facilitating productive dialogue to support team and organizational goals.

Professionalism & Service

DEFINITION

Advances team and organizational effectiveness by applying frameworks and supporting the development of others through continuous learning and professional practice.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Applies and shares frameworks, theories, and best practices to guide team and organizational decisions, while contributing to the field through committee work, leadership roles, and knowledge-sharing across campus, community, and professional organizations.
- Supports the professional growth of staff by encouraging and facilitating ongoing learning opportunities (e.g., trainings, certifications, conferences).
- Models professional judgment by selecting appropriate approaches based on context, complexity, and organizational priorities.

Operations

DEFINITION

Establishes vision and long-term direction for programs, services, and operations aligned with institutional priorities and future needs.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Develops and leads implementation of multi-year strategic plans, including capital projects, that position campus recreation to advance institutional goals.
- Allocates resources across programs or units based on data, trends, and long-term priorities.
- Leads organizational change initiatives that improve effectiveness, sustainability, or impact.
- Aligns and optimizes a portfolio of services (e.g., facilities, programs, memberships, wellbeing, outdoor recreation, and sport offerings) to advance institutional priorities, participant needs, and long-term sustainability.

Leadership

DEFINITION

Builds leadership capacity and organizational culture through workforce strategy, succession planning, and leadership development.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Designs organizational structures and workforce strategies aligned with long-term departmental and institutional priorities.
- Develops managers and senior staff to lead effectively, ensuring performance, accountability, and growth across teams.
- Shapes organizational culture by reinforcing shared values, accountability, and inclusive leadership practices across the department.
- Advocates for campus recreation's role and impact by using data, outcomes, and storytelling to influence institutional priorities and decisions.

Risk & Resource Management

DEFINITION

Establishes organizational approaches to risk, legal, financial, and human resource stewardship that protect and advance the institution.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Sets organizational priorities for risk, compliance, and resource stewardship aligned with institutional frameworks and strategy.
- Leads long-range financial and resource planning, including staffing models, capital investments, and revenue strategies.
- Partners across institutional units (e.g., legal, finance, HR, facilities) to optimize resource use and mitigate risk across the enterprise.
- Establishes and promotes ethical practices for the use of data, technology, and AI, guiding responsible governance, data integrity, and compliance with institutional and legal standards.
- Balances innovation, risk, and resource allocation to ensure sustainability and institutional impact.

Communication

DEFINITION

Advances institutional priorities and represents campus recreation through strategic partnerships, advocacy, and influence.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Builds and sustains partnerships with internal and external stakeholders to advance shared priorities.
- Leverages data, outcomes, and institutional metrics—supported by appropriate tools and systems—to evaluate impact, inform decisions, and advocate for resources and strategic investment in campus recreation.
- Models emotional intelligence and leads through complex or sensitive situations by managing conflict, adapting communication strategies, and fostering constructive dialogue across stakeholders.
- Communicates and translates the impact of campus recreation through compelling storytelling that connects programs and services to measurable outcomes that advance student success, wellbeing, and institutional priorities.

Professionalism & Service

DEFINITION

Advances the profession by contributing knowledge, shaping practice, and promoting continuous learning and professional standards across the field.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS

- Contributes to the advancement of the profession through research, presentations, publications, or leadership in professional organizations, campus committees/projects, or in the community.
- Promotes and supports a culture of continuous learning across the organization and profession.
- Shapes professional practice by integrating emerging trends, research, and innovations, while contributing to professional advancement through research, presentations, mentorship, or association leadership.

SECTION 3

Career Stages

When people think about career advancement, they often think about promotions. A new title. A bigger office. More responsibility.

While those things may accompany career growth, they don't define it. Real professional growth happens long before a promotion occurs. It happens when you make better decisions. When you begin solving problems independently. When colleagues seek out your perspective. When your influence expands beyond your own work.

The NIRSA Core Competencies were intentionally designed around growth rather than titles. The framework recognizes that professionals develop at different rates across different competencies and that growth often occurs gradually over time.

One person may be operating at a Mid-Career level in Operations while still developing Early Career capabilities in Communication. Another may demonstrate Senior Level Leadership skills while continuing to grow in Risk & Resource Management.

That isn't unusual.

It's reality.

The purpose of the career stages is not to label people. It is to help professionals understand where they are today and what growth may look like next.

Understanding the Three Career Stages

The framework is organized around three career stages:

01 Early Career

Professionals primarily focused on delivering high-quality work within established systems and processes.

02 Mid-Career

Professionals leading programs, services, teams, or functional areas while improving systems and developing others.

03 Senior Level

Professionals shaping strategy, building leadership capacity, and influencing organizational and institutional outcomes.

Career Stages at a Glance

	⁰¹ Early Career	⁰² Mid-Career	⁰³ Senior Level
PRIMARY FOCUS	Deliver & Apply	Lead & Deepen	Shape & Influence
PEOPLE LEADERSHIP	Student Staff	Professional Staff & Teams	Leaders & Managers
DECISION SCOPE	Programs & Events	Functional Areas	Department & Institution
TIME HORIZON	Days to Months	Months to Years	Years
SUCCESS MEASURED BY	Personal Effectiveness	Team Effectiveness	Organizational Impact

01

Early Career

PRIMARY FOCUS

Deliver & Apply

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

Student Staff

DECISION SCOPE

Programs & Events

TIME HORIZON

Days to Months

SUCCESS MEASURED BY

Personal Effectiveness

02

Mid-Career

PRIMARY FOCUS

Lead & Deepen

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

Professional Staff
& Teams

DECISION SCOPE

Functional Areas

TIME HORIZON

Months to Years

SUCCESS MEASURED BY

Team Effectiveness

03

Senior Level

PRIMARY FOCUS

Shape & Influence

PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

Leaders & Managers

DECISION SCOPE

Department &
Institution

TIME HORIZON

Years

SUCCESS MEASURED BY

Organizational Impact

As responsibilities expand, the focus shifts from executing work, to leading work, to shaping the future of the work.

EARLY CAREER

Building a Foundation

Early Career professionals are learning how the organization works and how their role contributes to larger goals. At this stage, success often means:

- Delivering consistent, high-quality work
- Applying established procedures
- Building professional relationships
- Developing sound judgment
- Learning from experience
- Supervising and supporting student employees

The most successful Early Career professionals are curious learners. They ask questions, seek feedback, and intentionally build their skills.

DAY IN THE LIFE

Jordan, Coordinator of Intramural Sports

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 8:00 a.m. | Reviews staffing schedules for evening games and fills an unexpected student staff vacancy. |
| 10:00 a.m. | Meets with a student employee who needs coaching on handling participant disputes. |
| 12:00 p.m. | Reviews participation data from a recent tournament and identifies opportunities for improvement. |
| 2:00 p.m. | Conducts staff training before evening competition. |
| 4:30 p.m. | Prepares an incident report following a participant injury. |

Jordan's day is focused on delivering quality experiences, supporting student staff, and ensuring operations run smoothly.

Most decisions affect a program, shift, event, or immediate operational area.

Career Stage Snapshot

Your Primary Focus

Building professional expertise while delivering high-quality programs, services, and experiences.

You May Be Here If...

- ✓ You are responsible for implementing programs, services, events, or facility operations.
- ✓ You primarily supervise student employees.
- ✓ Most of your decisions affect a shift, program, event, or operational area.
- ✓ You are learning how your institution, department, and profession operate.
- ✓ You are developing confidence in your professional judgment.

Typical Responsibilities

- Supervising student employees
- Managing daily operations
- Coordinating schedules and logistics
- Responding to participant needs
- Collecting and reviewing data
- Supporting departmental initiatives
- Following risk management procedures

What Success Looks Like

At this stage, successful professionals:

- Deliver consistent, high-quality work
- Build trust with colleagues and participants
- Demonstrate sound judgment
- Learn from feedback
- Take increasing ownership of responsibilities
- Seek opportunities to grow

Common Growth Areas

Many professionals at this stage are learning to:

- Navigate difficult conversations
- Manage competing priorities
- Analyze and use data effectively
- Influence without authority
- Develop confidence as supervisors

Questions to Ask Yourself

What skills am I intentionally developing?

Where do I consistently add value?

What feedback do I hear most often?

Which competency feels strongest today?

Which competency would create the greatest growth if I improved it?

Looking Ahead

Growth into Mid-Career often begins when professionals:

- ✓ Lead projects instead of only participating in them
- ✓ Improve systems instead of simply following them
- ✓ Mentor others
- ✓ Represent the department beyond their immediate role
- ✓ Influence decisions affecting broader areas of responsibility

MID-CAREER

Expanding Influence

Mid-Career professionals begin influencing work beyond their own individual responsibilities. They often lead teams, oversee programs, manage resources, and build partnerships across campus. At this stage, success is less about personally doing the work and more about helping others succeed.

The shift can feel uncomfortable.

Many professionals move into Mid-Career roles because they are excellent individual contributors. Suddenly they must spend more time coaching, delegating, planning, and influencing than personally executing tasks. That transition is one of the most important growth points in a campus recreation career.

DAY IN THE LIFE

Taylor, Assistant Director for Recreation Programs

8:00 a.m. Reviews participation trends across multiple programs and identifies emerging challenges.

10:00 a.m. Conducts a performance coaching conversation with a professional staff member.

1:00 p.m. Collaborates with Student Affairs leaders on a campus wellbeing initiative.

3:00 p.m. Reviews budget projections and resource needs for the upcoming year.

4:00 p.m. Meets with program coordinators to discuss operational improvements and assessment results.

Taylor's day focuses on leading people, improving systems, managing resources, and building partnerships.

Most decisions affect an entire program area, team, or functional unit.

Career Stage Snapshot

Your Primary Focus

Leading people, programs, and functional areas while improving systems, building partnerships, and developing others.

You May Be Here If...

- ✓ You supervise professional, graduate, and student staff.
- ✓ You lead one or more programs, services, facilities, or functional areas.
- ✓ Most of your decisions affect a team, department unit, or program area.
- ✓ You regularly collaborate with campus partners.
- ✓ You are responsible for improving processes, services, or outcomes.
- ✓ Others look to you for guidance, coaching, and leadership.

Typical Responsibilities

- Supervising and developing staff
- Managing budgets and resources
- Leading projects and initiatives
- Building campus partnerships
- Assessing program effectiveness
- Improving systems and processes
- Coordinating across multiple operational areas
- Managing competing priorities

What Success Looks Like

At this stage, successful professionals:

- Develop strong, accountable teams
- Improve the effectiveness of programs and services
- Build productive relationships across campus
- Use data to inform decisions
- Balance operational demands with strategic priorities
- Create opportunities for others to grow

Common Growth Areas

Many professionals at this stage are learning to:

- Lead through conflict and ambiguity
- Influence decisions beyond their immediate authority
- Think strategically rather than operationally
- Delegate effectively
- Advocate for resources and priorities
- Balance competing stakeholder interests

Questions to Ask Yourself

How effectively am I developing others?

What systems have I improved in the past year?

Where do I influence decisions beyond my immediate team?

How well do I connect daily work to larger goals?

What leadership skills will be most important for my next stage of growth?

Looking Ahead

Growth into Senior Level often begins when professionals:

- ✓ Think beyond a single program or functional area
- ✓ Develop other leaders, not just individual contributors
- ✓ Influence organizational strategy
- ✓ Lead significant organizational change
- ✓ Build partnerships across institutional boundaries
- ✓ Translate vision into action
- ✓ Connect departmental work to institutional priorities

SENIOR LEVEL

Shaping the Future

Senior Level professionals influence the future direction of campus recreation. Their work often involves strategy, organizational leadership, culture, partnerships, advocacy, and long-range planning. While Early Career professionals focus primarily on execution and Mid-Career professionals focus on leadership, Senior Level professionals spend increasing amounts of time shaping systems, organizations, and institutional priorities. Many of their most important contributions may not be visible in a single day. They are building capacity for years to come.

DAY IN THE LIFE

Morgan, Executive Director of Campus Recreation

8:00 a.m. Meets with the Vice President for Student Affairs regarding strategic priorities and resource planning.

10:00 a.m. Reviews departmental assessment data and identifies opportunities for future investment.

1:00 p.m. Works with senior staff on succession planning and leadership development initiatives.

3:00 p.m. Collaborates with external partners on community engagement opportunities.

5:00 p.m. Prepares a presentation connecting campus recreation outcomes to institutional priorities and student success metrics.

Morgan's day focuses on strategy, leadership development, advocacy, and institutional impact.

Most decisions affect the long-term future of the department.

Career Stage Snapshot

Your Primary Focus

Shaping organizational direction, building leadership capacity, and advancing institutional impact through strategy, advocacy, and stewardship.

You May Be Here If...

- ✓ You are responsible for the direction of multiple programs, units, or an entire department.
- ✓ You develop managers and future leaders.
- ✓ Most of your decisions have long-term organizational implications.
- ✓ You regularly engage with senior institutional leaders.
- ✓ You are responsible for strategic planning and resource allocation.
- ✓ You advocate for the role and value of campus recreation across the institution.

Typical Responsibilities

- Strategic planning
- Organizational leadership
- Leadership development and succession planning
- Resource allocation and budgeting
- Institutional partnerships
- Change management
- Advocacy and storytelling
- Culture development
- Long-range planning

What Success Looks Like

At this stage, successful professionals:

- Establish a clear vision for the future
- Develop strong leaders throughout the organization
- Build a healthy and sustainable culture
- Align departmental priorities with institutional goals
- Make informed decisions about risk and resources
- Demonstrate and communicate organizational impact

Common Growth Areas

Even experienced leaders continue developing. Common areas of growth include:

- Leading through uncertainty and change
- Balancing innovation with sustainability
- Navigating complex institutional dynamics
- Building influence across diverse stakeholder groups
- Strengthening executive leadership skills
- Expanding impact beyond the institution

Questions to Ask Yourself

What future am I helping create?

How effectively am I developing the next generation of leaders?

Where is the organization dependent on me rather than the systems I've built?

How well do I communicate the value of campus recreation?

What legacy will my leadership leave behind?

Looking Ahead

Senior Level growth often looks different than growth at earlier stages.

Rather than expanding responsibilities, growth often involves increasing impact.

Experienced leaders continue to grow when they:

- ✓ Build leadership capacity in others
- ✓ Strengthen organizational culture
- ✓ Increase institutional influence
- ✓ Advance the profession
- ✓ Create systems that endure beyond their tenure
- ✓ Leave the organization stronger than they found it

What's Really Different About These Levels?

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Jordan's First Five Years

When Jordan first joined campus recreation as a coordinator, success meant running great programs and solving operational problems. Jordan became known as someone who could be counted on. After several years, new opportunities emerged.

Jordan began:

- Leading project teams
- Mentoring newer professionals
- Representing the department on campus committees
- Managing larger budgets
- Improving operational processes

Without realizing it, Jordan's responsibilities were beginning to shift from Early Career to Mid-Career. The title change eventually came. But the growth happened long before the promotion. That is how career progression typically works. The competencies help make that growth visible.

A Final Thought

You do not need to be operating at the same career stage across every competency. In fact, most professionals are not. The goal is not perfection. The goal is awareness. Understanding where you are today creates clarity about where you want to grow tomorrow.

In the next section, you'll have an opportunity to assess your own strengths, identify growth opportunities, and begin creating a roadmap for your continued development.

SECTION 4

Self-Assessment & Professional Growth

Many competency frameworks ask people to determine what level they are. The NIRSA Core Competencies are designed to support a different conversation. Rather than asking: “Am I Early Career, Mid-Career, or Senior Level?” we encourage professionals to ask:

- “Which competencies and behaviors are most important in my role today?”
- “Which ones represent opportunities for growth?”
- “Which skills will help me achieve my professional goals?”

Because campus recreation looks different at every institution, there is no single pathway through the framework.

A Coordinator at one institution may regularly demonstrate indicators associated with Mid-Career work. An Assistant Director at another institution may be developing skills that align with multiple career stages. A Director may demonstrate Senior Level capabilities in some competencies while continuing to grow in others.

That diversity is expected. The framework was intentionally designed to be flexible. Use it as a guide for reflection and development—not as a classification system.

A Note About Career Stages

Career stages describe the scope, complexity, and impact of work. They do not define job titles. They do not determine promotion eligibility. They are not intended to prescribe how institutions structure positions. Instead, they provide examples of how professional responsibilities often evolve over time. As you review the competencies, you may identify with indicators from multiple career stages.

That is normal.

In fact, it is one of the most valuable aspects of the framework because it helps illuminate both strengths and opportunities for growth.

Using the Framework for Self-Reflection

The most effective professionals make time to step back and evaluate their own growth. The competencies provide a structure for those reflections. Instead of asking whether you are performing at a certain level, consider:

What am I doing well?

- Where am I most confident?
- Where do I consistently add value?
- Which responsibilities feel most natural?

Where am I growing?

- Which situations continue to challenge me?
- Where do I need more experience?
- What feedback do I receive most often?

What should I focus on next?

- If I improved one or two capabilities this year, which would have the greatest impact on my effectiveness?
- What skills will be important for my future goals?

How to Use the Self-Assessment Tool

The full self-assessment tool can be found in Section 6.

Rather than assigning yourself a career stage, the assessment allows you to explore behavioral indicators across all levels of the framework.

For each competency:

1. **Review** the behavioral indicators.
2. **Identify** indicators that closely reflect your current work.
3. **Highlight** indicators you consistently demonstrate.
4. **Identify** indicators you would like to strengthen.
5. **Reflect** on patterns and growth opportunities.

The objective is not to score yourself.

The objective is to identify meaningful opportunities for growth.

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Jordan Reflects on Growth

Jordan has now been working in campus recreation for nearly three years. During a quiet afternoon after the intramural season ends, Jordan decides to complete the NIRSA self-assessment.

As Jordan reviews the Operations indicators, several stand out immediately.

- Coordinating schedules.
- Managing staffing logistics.
- Using participation data to improve programs.

Those behaviors feel familiar and comfortable. Jordan highlights them as strengths.

When reviewing Communication, however, a different pattern emerges.

Several indicators catch Jordan's attention:

- Navigating differing perspectives
- Advocating for program needs
- Facilitating productive dialogue

Representing the department in collaborative initiatives

Jordan realizes these situations feel less comfortable and occur less frequently.

The insight is helpful.

Rather than trying to improve everything at once, Jordan identifies Communication as a priority area for the coming year. For the first time, professional development feels less overwhelming.

The framework hasn't provided a score.

It has provided direction.

Looking for Patterns

As you complete the self-assessment, focus less on individual indicators and more on the larger picture.

Ask yourself:

- **Which competency appears strongest?**
 - Why?
 - What experiences contributed to that strength?
 - How can you continue building on it?
- **Which competency presents the greatest opportunity?**
 - What specific behaviors would you like to strengthen?
 - What experiences might help you develop them?
- **Which competency aligns with your future goals?**
 - What skills will be increasingly important as your responsibilities grow?
 - What opportunities could help you gain experience in those areas?

Selecting Development Priorities

One of the most common mistakes professionals make is trying to improve everything at once. Growth rarely happens that way. The most effective development plans focus on one or two priorities. As you review your self-assessment results, identify:

1. **One Primary Growth Area** - The competency that would have the greatest impact on your effectiveness if strengthened.
2. **One Supporting Growth Area** - A competency that complements or reinforces your primary focus.

For example:

Primary Focus: *Communication*

Supporting Focus: *Leadership*

A professional seeking greater leadership responsibility may benefit from simultaneously strengthening coaching, influence, conflict management, and relationship-building skills. The goal is not to become an expert in every competency. The goal is to make intentional progress in areas that matter most.

Professional Growth Starts with Awareness

Professional growth rarely begins with a promotion. More often, it begins with awareness. Awareness of strengths. Awareness of opportunities. Awareness of what comes next.

The NIRSA Core Competencies provide a framework for those conversations.

They help transform professional growth from something that happens accidentally into something that happens intentionally. In the next section, we'll explore how supervisors, mentors, and colleagues can use the competencies to support coaching, feedback, and professional development conversations.

SECTION 5

Coaching & Developing Others

Most professional growth does not happen during a conference session, a training workshop, or a performance review. It happens through conversations.

A supervisor provides feedback after a challenging situation. A mentor asks a thoughtful question. A colleague shares a different perspective. A leader creates space for reflection. Over time, these conversations shape how professionals see themselves, understand their strengths, and identify opportunities for growth.

The NIRSA Core Competencies provide a shared language for those conversations.

They help move feedback from vague observations to meaningful discussions about professional practice. Instead of saying: “You need to communicate better.” We can ask: “Which communication behaviors would help you be more effective in this situation?” That shift often leads to more productive and actionable development conversations.

Coaching Versus Evaluation

One of the most important distinctions in professional development is the difference between coaching and evaluation. Evaluation looks backward. It assesses past performance. Coaching looks forward. It focuses on future growth. While the competencies can support performance reviews, their greatest value often comes through ongoing coaching conversations that help professionals develop throughout the year.

When using the framework in coaching conversations, focus less on ratings and more on reflection.

Ask:

What went well?

What was challenging?

What did you learn?

What would you do differently next time?

The goal is growth, not judgment.

Using Competencies in Coaching Conversations

The competencies provide a common language that helps coaching conversations remain focused on observable behaviors. A simple coaching approach involves four steps:

1. **Observe** - Describe what happened and focus on specific behaviors rather than assumptions or interpretations
2. **Connect** - Identify the competency or behavioral indicator that relates to the situation.
3. **Explore** - Ask questions that encourage reflection and learning.
4. **Plan** - Identify a specific next step or development opportunity.

Example:

Situation

A student supervisor struggles to provide corrective feedback to a student employee who repeatedly arrives late for shifts.

Observe

"I noticed you've had several conversations about attendance with the student employee, but the behavior hasn't changed."

Connect

"This connects to your Leadership and Communication competencies, particularly around setting expectations and addressing concerns directly."

Explore

"What has made those conversations challenging?"

"What approaches have you tried?"

"What might help you feel more confident?"

Plan

"Before the next conversation, let's work together to prepare a clear message and discuss possible responses."

The conversation stays focused on growth rather than criticism.

Questions That Encourage Growth

Strong coaches spend less time providing answers and more time asking questions. Questions create reflection. Reflection creates learning.

The examples below can help guide development conversations.

When You Want to Explore Strengths

Which aspects of your role energize you most?

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

Which competencies feel most natural to you?

Where do you consistently add value?

What strengths do others frequently recognize?

When You Want to Explore Challenges

What situations do you find most difficult?

Which responsibilities feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar?

Where do you feel less confident?

What feedback have you received recently?

Which competency would you most like to strengthen?

When You Want to Explore Future Growth

What professional goals are important to you?

What experiences would help you grow?

Which competencies align with your future aspirations?

What opportunities would stretch you in productive ways?

How can others support your development?

Coaching Across Career Stages

The nature of coaching often changes as responsibilities expand. While every individual is unique, the examples below illustrate common themes.

Early Career Professionals

Coaching often focuses on:

- Building confidence
- Developing professional judgment
- Learning organizational systems
- Strengthening communication skills
- Supervising student employees

Common question:

“What experience would help you feel more prepared in this situation next time?”

Mid-Career Professionals

Coaching often focuses on:

- Leading teams
- Developing others
- Managing conflict
- Building partnerships
- Improving systems and processes

Common question:

“How can you create conditions that help others succeed?”

Senior Level Professionals

Coaching often focuses on:

- Strategic thinking
- Organizational leadership
- Succession planning
- Institutional influence
- Change leadership

Common question:

“What long-term impact are you trying to create?”

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Jordan Becomes a Coach

Several years have passed since Jordan first entered the profession. Jordan is now supervising two professional staff members and a larger student leadership team. One afternoon, a staff member asks for advice about managing a difficult conversation with a student employee. Jordan's first instinct is to provide a solution. Instead, Jordan pauses and asks: "What do you think is making the conversation difficult?"

The discussion continues.

Together, they explore options, identify concerns, and develop a plan. Afterward, Jordan realizes something important. Coaching isn't about having all the answers. It's about helping others discover their own answers. The competencies provide a framework for those conversations.

But the real growth comes from the dialogue itself.

Creating a Culture of Development

The most effective departments do not limit development conversations to annual reviews.

Instead, they create a culture where growth is part of everyday work.

This can be as simple as:

- Discussing competencies during one-on-one meetings.
- Reflecting on lessons learned after major events.
- Connecting feedback to specific behaviors.
- Celebrating growth and progress.
- Encouraging staff to identify development goals.

Small conversations, repeated consistently over time, often have a greater impact than formal development programs.

A Final Thought

Every professional remembers someone who helped them grow. A supervisor who believed in them. A mentor who challenged them. A colleague who offered honest feedback. The NIRSA Core Competencies are not intended to replace those relationships. They are intended to strengthen them. By providing a shared language for growth, the competencies help transform everyday conversations into opportunities for learning, development, and professional success.

In the next section, we'll explore practical ways individuals, teams, and departments can begin using the competencies in their daily work.

SECTION 6

Getting Started

When people first encounter a competency framework, they often assume implementation requires a major initiative.

New forms. New processes. New training programs. New performance evaluations. The most successful implementations usually begin much more simply. One conversation. One reflection. One coaching discussion. One development goal.

The NIRSA Core Competencies are designed to be flexible. You do not need to use every part of the framework immediately. In fact, we encourage you not to. Start with a small, meaningful application that addresses a real need in your current role, team, or department. Build from there.



If You're Using the Framework for Yourself

Many NIRSA members will first encounter the competencies as individuals seeking professional growth. If that's you, consider starting with one of these approaches.

1. Reflect on Your Current Role

Review the competency indicators and identify:

- Behaviors that reflect your current strengths
- Areas where you'd like to grow
- Competencies that align with future goals

Use the reflection worksheets in Section 6 to capture your thoughts.

2. Create One Development Goal

Choose one competency and one behavioral indicator. Focus on strengthening that behavior over the next six months. Remember: You do not need to improve everything at once. One meaningful area of growth often creates momentum for many others.

3. Discuss the Framework with a Mentor

Professional growth rarely happens in isolation. Consider sharing your reflections with:

- A supervisor
- A mentor
- A trusted colleague
- A professional network connection

Fresh perspectives often reveal strengths and opportunities we might overlook ourselves.



If You're Supervising Others

The competencies can provide a helpful structure for coaching and development conversations. You do not need to redesign your entire supervision process to begin using the framework. Consider these simple starting points.

- **Add One Competency Question to One-on-Ones.**

Try using one of these lines:

- *What competency are you currently working to strengthen?*
- *What professional skill would you most like to develop?*
- *Which recent experience helped you grow?*

Over time, these conversations build greater self-awareness and intentional development.

- **Use the Framework During Feedback Conversations**

When discussing performance, connect observations to specific behaviors rather than general impressions. Instead of: "You're doing a great job." Try: "I've noticed how consistently you create a positive and inclusive environment for student staff." Specific feedback is easier to understand, repeat, and develop.

- **Encourage Reflection**

When challenges occur, ask:

- *What happened?*
- *What did you learn?*
- *Which competency was most relevant?*
- *What would you do differently next time?*

These questions often lead to more meaningful growth than providing immediate solutions.



If You're Leading a Team

The competencies can also support team development. You don't need a formal implementation plan to begin creating a shared language around growth.

- **Introduce the Framework**

Share the competencies with your team.

Discuss:

- *Which competencies are most important to your work?*
- *Which competencies feel strongest as a team?*
- *Which competencies would you like to strengthen together?*

These conversations often reveal valuable insights about team culture and priorities.

- **Highlight Competencies During Meetings**

Consider periodically recognizing examples of the competencies in action, such as: "I'd like to recognize the way our team collaborated with campus partners during orientation. That was a great example of Communication." Or, "the way we responded to last week's facility issue demonstrated strong Risk & Resource Management."

Over time, the language becomes part of the team's culture.

- **Use Competencies During Project Debriefs**

After major events or initiatives, ask:

- *What went well?*
- *Which competencies helped us succeed?*
- *What should we do differently next time?*

The framework becomes a tool for learning rather than evaluation.



If You're Leading a Department

Departments vary significantly in size, structure, resources, and priorities. For that reason, the competencies are intentionally flexible. There is no single "correct" implementation model. Instead, look for opportunities to align the framework with existing practices.

Examples may include:

- *Professional development planning*
- *Staff onboarding*
- *Leadership development programs*
- *Coaching conversations*
- *Performance discussions*
- *Succession planning*

Start where there is energy and interest. Expansion can happen over time.

COMPETENCY IN ACTION

Jordan Brings the Framework to the Team

A few months after completing the self-assessment, Jordan is preparing for a regular staff meeting.

The team has recently completed a busy intramural season and everyone is reflecting on what went well and what could be improved.

Instead of jumping directly into logistics, Jordan asks a different question.

“Looking back, which competencies helped us succeed this semester?”

The discussion begins slowly.

Then the examples start flowing.

Operations: Improved scheduling processes.

Communication: Better collaboration between student supervisors.

Leadership: Several student leaders stepped into new responsibilities.

Risk & Resource Management: A challenging incident was handled effectively and professionally.

The conversation takes only fifteen minutes.

Yet by the end, the team has a clearer understanding of their strengths and opportunities than they gained from reviewing statistics alone.

Jordan realizes something important.

The competencies don't need to be a separate initiative.

They can simply become part of how people talk about their work.

Commonly Asked Questions About the Framework

Do I need to use every competency?

No. Focus on the competencies most relevant to your current role and goals. Over time, your areas of focus may change.

What if I identify with indicators from multiple career stages?

That's expected. Career stages describe scope and impact, not job titles. Many professionals will recognize themselves across multiple stages.

What if my institution already has a competency framework?

The NIRSA Core Competencies are intended to complement—not replace—existing institutional frameworks. Many institutions choose to use NIRSA's competencies as a profession-specific lens alongside broader institutional expectations.

Do I need to formally assess staff using the competencies?

No. The competencies can support assessment processes, but they can also be used informally for reflection, coaching, mentoring, and development. Use the framework in ways that fit your department's culture and needs.

A Final Thought

The most valuable competency framework is not the one that sits on a shelf. It's the one that becomes part of everyday conversations.

- A conversation about growth.
- A coaching discussion.
- A development goal.
- A reflection after a challenging experience.
- A recognition of someone's strengths.

Start there. Small conversations, repeated consistently over time, often create the greatest impact.

The tools in the next section are designed to help you put those conversations into practice.

SECTION 7

Tools, Templates & Practical Resources

The tools in this section are designed to help you put the NIRSA Core Competencies into practice.

Use them individually, with a supervisor or mentor, as part of a team discussion, or within professional development conversations. These tools are intended to support reflection, growth, and learning. They are not intended to function as a prescribed evaluation system. Adapt them to fit your role, institution, and goals.

TOOL 1

Competency Exploration Worksheet

Purpose

Use this worksheet to identify the competencies and behavioral indicators that are most relevant to your current role, professional goals, and development priorities. There is no “correct” outcome. The objective is to identify where you are today and where you would like to grow.

Instructions

Using Appendix A:

- ✓ Place a check mark beside indicators that strongly reflect your current responsibilities.
- ★ Place a star beside indicators you would like to strengthen.
- Place an arrow beside indicators that align with your future professional goals.

REFLECTION WORKSHEET

Operations

Current strengths:

Indicators I would like to strengthen:

Indicators relevant to future goals:

Leadership

Current strengths:

Indicators I would like to strengthen:

Indicators relevant to future goals:

Risk & Resource Management

Current strengths:

Indicators I would like to strengthen:

Indicators relevant to future goals:

Communication

Current strengths:

Indicators I would like to strengthen:

Indicators relevant to future goals:

Professionalism & Service

Current strengths:

Indicators I would like to strengthen:

Indicators relevant to future goals:

Example: Jordan's Competency Exploration

COMMUNICATION

Behavioral Indicators

- ✓ Communicates operational information clearly with staff, participants, and supervisors.
- ✓ Uses available data or feedback to identify needs and suggest improvements within area of responsibility.
- ★ Navigates conflict and differing perspectives by managing emotions, adapting communication style, and facilitating productive dialogue.
- ★ Advocates for program or functional area needs by communicating priorities, outcomes, and resource considerations to stakeholders.
- Represents the department in cross-campus initiatives or collaborative projects.
- Communicates and translates the impact of campus recreation through compelling storytelling that connects programs and services to measurable outcomes.

Jordan's Notes

Current Strengths

I feel confident communicating operational information, responding to participant concerns, and sharing updates with staff.

Growth Opportunities

I would like more experience facilitating difficult conversations and managing situations where people have competing perspectives.

Future Goals

I hope to move into a role with greater leadership responsibility. The indicators related to advocacy, collaboration, and representing the department align closely with that goal.

Key Insight

Most of my current responsibilities align with operational communication. Many of the skills I need for future growth involve influence, partnership-building, and navigating complex conversations.

TOOL 2

Competency Reflection Summary

Purpose

After reviewing the framework, use this worksheet to identify themes and patterns.

Competency	My Current Strengths	Growth Opportunities	Future Relevance
Operations			
Leadership			
Risk & Resource Management			
Communication			
Professionalism & Service			

Reflection Questions

Which competency currently feels strongest?

Which competency would most improve my effectiveness if strengthened?

Which competency is becoming increasingly important to my future goals?

What surprised me during this reflection?

Example: Jordan's Competency Reflection Summary

Competency Reflection Summary

Competency	My Current Strengths	Growth Opportunities	Future Relevance
Operations	Coordinating schedules and staffing, managing program logistics, using participation data to improve events, and responding effectively to operational issues.	Leading operational improvements across multiple functional areas and thinking more strategically about long-term program development.	High
Leadership	Building positive relationships with student employees, creating a supportive team environment, and communicating expectations clearly.	Providing corrective feedback more confidently, coaching emerging student leaders, and advocating for operational needs with greater confidence.	High
Risk & Resource Management	Following safety procedures, documenting incidents accurately, and using resources responsibly.	Gaining greater exposure to budgeting, policy development, and risk assessment beyond day-to-day operations.	Moderate
Communication	Communicating operational information clearly and professionally, gathering feedback from participants, and maintaining positive working relationships.	Navigating difficult conversations, facilitating dialogue during disagreements, and advocating for program needs with campus partners.	Very High
Professionalism & Service	Participating in professional development opportunities, engaging with NIRSA resources, and applying best practices in daily work.	Becoming more involved in professional service, presenting at conferences, and contributing knowledge to the field.	Moderate

Reflection Questions

Which competency currently feels strongest?

Operations

I feel most confident in operational work because it represents the majority of my current responsibilities. I regularly manage schedules, staffing, events, participant concerns, and program logistics. I am comfortable solving problems as they arise and ensuring programs run smoothly.

Which competency would most improve my effectiveness if strengthened?

Communication

While I communicate operational information effectively, I would like to become more confident navigating difficult conversations, managing conflict, facilitating discussions among differing viewpoints, and representing departmental priorities in broader conversations.

Improving in this area would strengthen both my current performance and my readiness for future leadership opportunities.

Which competency is becoming increasingly important to my future goals?

Leadership

As I think about future opportunities, I recognize that success will depend less on what I personally accomplish and more on my ability to develop others, build teams, and create positive work environments.

I want to become a stronger coach and mentor for both student and professional staff.

What surprised me during this reflection?

I expected Leadership to be my primary development area, but after reviewing the framework, I realized Communication is actually the skill that may have the greatest impact on my growth.

Many of the leadership opportunities I aspire to will require facilitating conversations, managing conflict, building partnerships, and influencing decisions. Those capabilities all connect directly to Communication.

The reflection helped me see that strengthening Communication may be one of the most effective ways to prepare for future leadership responsibilities.

Development Priorities

Primary Growth Area

Communication

Focus Areas:

- Navigating conflict and differing perspectives
- Facilitating productive dialogue
- Representing the department in collaborative initiatives
- Advocating for program needs using data and outcomes

Supporting Growth Area

Leadership

Focus Areas:

- Coaching student supervisors
- Providing developmental feedback
- Building confidence in leadership conversations
- Creating opportunities for others to grow

My Key Takeaway

I do not need to become stronger in every competency at once.

My greatest opportunity for growth is strengthening Communication while continuing to build Leadership experience. If I focus intentionally on those areas over the next year, I will be better prepared for future responsibilities and leadership opportunities.

TOOL 3

Professional Growth Planning Worksheet

Purpose

Turn reflection into action.

Choose one competency and one behavioral indicator to focus on over the next six to twelve months.

Competency Focus

Behavioral Indicator

Why This Matters

Development Goal

Actions I Will Take

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Resources & Support Needed

Evidence of Success

Target Review Date

Example: Jordan's Professional Growth Plan

Competency Focus

Communication

Behavioral Indicator

Navigates conflict and differing perspectives by managing emotions, adapting communication style, and facilitating productive dialogue to support team and organizational goals.

Why This Matters

As my responsibilities continue to grow, I am spending more time coaching student supervisors, collaborating with campus partners, and addressing challenging situations.

I feel confident communicating information, but I would like to become more effective facilitating difficult conversations and helping others work through disagreements.

Developing this skill will help me become a stronger leader and prepare me for future opportunities.

Development Goal

Over the next 12 months, I will strengthen my ability to facilitate difficult conversations by intentionally practicing conflict management, seeking feedback, and taking on opportunities that require collaboration across differing perspectives.

Actions I Will Take

1. Lead More Challenging Conversations

Rather than avoiding difficult discussions, I will intentionally take the lead when addressing performance concerns, participant complaints, or team disagreements.

Target: Facilitate at least three difficult conversations this semester.

2. Seek Feedback

After each significant conversation, I will ask my supervisor or a trusted colleague for feedback on my communication approach.

Target: Request feedback following at least three conversations.

3. Observe Strong Communicators

I will identify experienced professionals who demonstrate strong communication and conflict-management skills and observe how they facilitate discussions.

Target: Observe two colleagues and discuss strategies they use.

4. Expand Campus Collaboration

I will volunteer for at least one campus committee or collaborative initiative that requires working with individuals from different departments and perspectives.

Target: Join one cross-campus initiative this year.

Resources & Support Needed

- Supervisor feedback and coaching
- Access to conflict-management training opportunities
- Opportunities to participate in campus committees
- Time for reflection following difficult conversations

Evidence of Success

I will know I am making progress when:

- ✓ I feel more confident entering difficult conversations.
- ✓ I receive positive feedback regarding my communication effectiveness.
- ✓ I can facilitate disagreements without immediately escalating concerns to my supervisor.
- ✓ I am trusted to represent the department in collaborative campus discussions.

Target Review Date

Six-Month Check-In:

January 15

Final Review:

July 15

Reflection

Success for me is not avoiding difficult conversations.

Success is being able to navigate them professionally, respectfully, and effectively while helping others move toward a productive outcome.

TOOL 4

Career Conversation Guide

Purpose

Use this guide during discussions with supervisors, mentors, coaches, or trusted colleagues.

Current Role

What aspects of your work energize you most?

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

What strengths are most visible in your current role?

Professional Growth

What skills are you currently developing?

What experiences have challenged you recently?

Which competencies would you most like to strengthen?

Future Goals

What professional aspirations are important to you?

What experiences would help you prepare?

What competencies align with those goals?

Support

What support would be most valuable?

How can others help you continue growing?

Example: Jordan's Career Conversation

Current Role

What aspects of your work energize you most?

I enjoy building relationships with student employees and creating positive experiences for participants. I also enjoy solving operational challenges and improving processes.

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

This year, our intramural program increased participation and reduced scheduling conflicts. I also helped develop several student supervisors who took on greater leadership responsibilities.

Professional Growth

What skills are you currently developing?

Communication, particularly facilitating difficult conversations and navigating differing perspectives.

What experiences have challenged you recently?

Addressing performance concerns with student employees and participating in discussions where multiple stakeholders had competing priorities.

Which competencies would you most like to strengthen?

Communication and Leadership.

Future Goals

What professional aspirations are important to you?

I would like to pursue an Assistant Director role in the future and take on broader leadership responsibilities.

What experiences would help you prepare?

Leading cross-functional projects, serving on campus committees, and gaining more experience coaching staff.

Support

What support would be most valuable?

Feedback after difficult conversations, opportunities to represent the department on collaborative initiatives, and mentorship from experienced leaders.

TOOL 5

Coaching Conversation Guide

Purpose

Use this framework to support meaningful coaching discussions.

STEP 1: Observe

What specific behavior did you observe?

STEP 2: Connect

Which competency is most relevant?

STEP 3: Explore

What questions might help the individual reflect?

STEP 4: Plan

What development action will be taken?

STEP 5: Follow Up

What evidence would demonstrate growth?

Coaching Conversation Starters

What went well?

What was challenging?

What were you thinking in that moment?

What options did you consider?

What would you do differently next time?

What support would help?

TOOL 6

Career Mapping Worksheet

Purpose

Connect today's work to future opportunities.

My Current Role

Future Role or Aspiration

Competencies Most Relevant to That Future Opportunity

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Experiences That Could Help Me Grow

- ☐ Lead a project
- ☐ Serve on a committee
- ☐ Present at a conference
- ☐ Facilitate training
- ☐ Mentor others
- ☐ Participate in a professional association
- ☐ Cross-functional collaboration
- ☐ Stretch assignment
- ☐ Other:

My Next Development Step

Example: Jordan's Career Map

My Current Role

Coordinator of Intramural Sports

Responsibilities include:

- Supervising student employees
- Managing game operations
- Scheduling and staffing
- Participant communication
- Program assessment

Future Role or Aspiration

Assistant Director of Recreation Programs

I would like to lead multiple program areas, supervise professional staff, and contribute to departmental planning and strategy.

Competencies Most Relevant to That Future Opportunity

1. Communication

Developing confidence in conflict management, facilitation, and advocacy.

2. Leadership

Coaching others, providing developmental feedback, and building team capacity.

3. Risk & Resource Management

Gaining experience with budgeting, resource allocation, and policy development.

Experiences That Could Help Me Grow

- ✓ Lead a campus-wide recreation initiative
- ✓ Serve on a student wellbeing committee
- ✓ Mentor student supervisors
- ✓ Present at a state or regional conference
- ✓ Participate in a NIRSA volunteer opportunity
- ✓ Assist with departmental assessment and planning projects

My Next Development Step

Volunteer to represent Campus Recreation on the university's Student Wellbeing Task Force.

This opportunity will strengthen communication, collaboration, and leadership skills while providing experience working with stakeholders from across campus.

Long-Term Goal

Within the next three to five years, I would like to be prepared for an Assistant Director position by broadening my leadership experience, strengthening communication skills, and developing a deeper understanding of departmental strategy and resource management.

TOOL 7

Team Reflection Worksheet

Purpose

Use after major events, initiatives, or projects.

What went well?

Which competencies helped us succeed?

What challenges did we encounter?

Which competencies could help us improve?

What should we do differently next time?

TOOL 8

My Professional Growth Commitments

The most meaningful development plans are simple and specific.

Over the next 12 months, I will focus on:

Primary Competency:

Behavioral Indicator:

Specific Action:

Date to Revisit Progress:

Signature: _____

Jordan's Journey Through the Framework

1

STEP 1

Completed Competency Exploration

2

STEP 2

Identified Communication as a growth area

3

STEP 3

Created a Professional Growth Plan

4

STEP 4

Discussed goals with supervisor

5

STEP 5

Joined Student Wellbeing Task Force

6

STEP 6

Strengthened communication and leadership skills

Result

Prepared for broader responsibilities and future career opportunities

Final Reflection

Professional growth is rarely the result of a single workshop, conference, or conversation. It is the result of small actions repeated consistently over time. Use these tools to identify strengths, explore opportunities, build new skills, and support meaningful conversations. Return to them often. Growth is not a destination. It is a continuous process of learning, reflection, and development.