

NIRSA PROMISING PRACTICES

UC Berkeley's Systemic Approach to Exercise is Medicine: A Campus Movement



THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY'S

Exercise is Medicine® On Campus (EIM-OC) initiative transcends traditional wellness programs by embedding holistic health into the campus culture. This initiative enhances physical health and integrates mental, emotional, and social wellness, creating a multi-dimensional approach to student health. Furthermore, unlike many institutions that primarily focus on individual health improvements, UC Berkeley employs a systemic approach that includes multiple campus stakeholders. This elevates their EIM program to a model of comprehensive, community-focused wellbeing.

At the heart of the Golden State, the University of California, Berkeley stands as a recognized pillar of higher education. Established over a century and a half ago, UC Berkeley has flourished into an academic powerhouse renowned for its diverse disciplines and commitment to creating global change. With over 350 degree programs, the university draws a mosaic of students from every continent with each bringing unique perspectives that enrich the campus community.

UC Berkeley prides itself on its vibrant community life where the passion for knowledge meets a deeply rooted culture of social activism. The campus serves as a place for ideas that shape our world, fostering innovations that range from the tech industry's latest revolutions to groundbreaking strides in environmental policy.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY FAST FACTS

Public land-grant research university

Enrollment: 45,000 students

Founding campus of the University of California system

RecWell Instagram: @ucberkeleyrecwell

NIRSA Region VI

NIRSA member since 1971

The university's ethos is marked by a steadfast commitment to inclusivity and social justice, ensuring that all members of its community—regardless of background—have opportunity to excel. This commitment is exemplified in programs that address the variety of student needs, fostering a nurturing environment that encourages personal and intellectual growth. As UC Berkeley looks to the future, its mission is to develop leaders, drive innovation, and empower individuals to effect positive change globally.

Understanding Exercise is Medicine® On Campus (EIM-OC)

The Exercise is Medicine® On Campus initiative, championed by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), promotes the integration of physical activity as a vital health indicator within college campuses. It encourages a collaborative approach among health professionals, fitness experts, and academic institutions to foster a culture where physical activity is a routine part of daily life, aiming to improve students' and faculty's overall health and wellbeing.

At UC Berkeley the program encourages an active lifestyle within the campus community, recognizing the importance of integrating movement into daily life as a key health indicator. Medical and mental health, as well as self referrals, act as a gateway to the program. The journey starts with a comprehensive health visit at University Health Services where physical activity levels are evaluated as a crucial health metric. Depending on their needs, students receive personalized referrals to campus fitness specialists or health educators. Engaging in these recommended activities, students can take advantage of ongoing support from health professionals and fitness experts to sustain and adjust their fitness routines effectively with no additional costs. This system provides a structured pathway for students to integrate physical activity into their daily lives, enhancing both physical and mental wellness.

Key campus groups involved

The success of the EIM program at UC Berkeley is a testament to the strong collaboration among various campus groups. University Health Services (UHS), Berkeley Recreation & Wellbeing (RecWell), the School of Public Health, and the Physical Education Program play pivotal roles. Each group brings unique expertise and resources to promote physical activity as a fundamental component of health and wellbeing.



NIRSA Promising Practices are an outcome of NIRSA's Health & Wellbeing Task Force. Learn more at nirsa.org/promising

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Dr. Marlon Maus, MD, DrPH, FACS, one of the leads within the EIM Committee from the School of Public Health notes, “Our collaborative efforts are essential for the success of the EIM initiative. By pooling our resources and expertise, we can reach a broader segment of our campus community and effectively integrate health and wellbeing into the daily lives of our students.”

The strides taken by UC Berkeley in nurturing a health-centric campus reflect its commitment to collaboration and regular engagement among dedicated teams across departments. These groups—united by a shared passion for enhancing the health and wellbeing of every campus

member—convene regularly, not confined by traditional structures or bureaucracy. Instead, they operate with a fluidity that allows for dynamic interaction and prompt action.

When a colleague shared the barriers UC Berkeley’s neurodivergent population faced regarding physical exercise, the group swiftly tailored its efforts to reach this population of students with an EIM solution that is both scalable and structured. They adopted a systems-level approach, analyzing how the existing EIM-OC structure could be adapted to meet these specific needs. By bringing together expertise from various departments, they developed targeted, inclusive fitness programs. For example, they introduced specialized training for staff to better understand and support neurodiverse students’ experiences in physical activities. They also implemented feedback mechanisms to continually refine the approach.

This rapid, responsive action was facilitated by the committees’ operational fluidity, bypassing lengthy bureaucratic processes. These swift changes ensured the neurodivergent population at UC Berkeley has opportunities to participate without barriers, which ultimately creates a more inclusive and accommodating environment for all.

From the beginning, the coalition of health advocates, educators, and students at UC Berkeley has been characterized by the dedication to the cause. It’s a partnership that transcends disciplinary boundaries, where insights from public health experts, insights from personal trainers, and feedback from the student body meet to inform and shape EIM that responds to the campus community. Here, health isn’t seen as a mere absence of illness but as a positive, vibrant state of complete physical, mental, and social wellness. This shared effort has fostered a space where innovation in wellbeing is not just encouraged but expected.



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Revolutionizing campus health: EIM's integration into health records

The EIM program at UC Berkeley is leading a health (and systems) revolution, seamlessly integrating wellness and physical fitness metrics into the campus' electronic health records (EHR). This boldly elevates the importance of physical health to the same level as traditional vital signs, setting a new standard in student healthcare and preemptive health practices.

Mary Popylisen, PT, ATC, Physical Therapy Manager at UHS, champions this innovative approach. She shares, "Our integration of fitness metrics into EHRs represents a fundamental shift in how we perceive and prioritize student health. It's a concrete step towards acknowledging that physical activity is just as critical to student health as any other vital sign we measure."

This initiative reflects UC Berkeley's commitment to a holistic health model. By considering physical fitness metrics as essential health indicators, the university is expanding its health promotion but also tailoring its healthcare services to the unique needs of each student. As Mary notes, "It's about building a complete picture of our students' health and ensuring every aspect of their wellbeing is supported and nurtured."

The EIM program's involvement in enhancing EHRs showcases UC Berkeley's forward-thinking mindset. It's a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive health management—one that Mary believes will "empower our students to take control of their health, encouraging them to incorporate fitness and wellbeing into their daily lives."

In a nutshell, UC Berkeley's EIM program is not just advocating for better fitness; it's embedding the philosophy of wellness into the very infrastructure of campus health services. With leaders of all the campus stakeholders at the helm, the program is undoubtedly set to leave a lasting impact on the health and wellbeing of every student it touches.

"What we've created here at UC Berkeley is more than a program—it's a movement. A movement towards a healthier, more inclusive future. And it's a journey that's just beginning."

— Dr. Marlon Maus

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Grant funding and program expansion

The remarkable expansion of UC Berkeley's Exercise is Medicine (EIM) program can be largely attributed to the visionary use of grant funding from the University of California system Equity in Mental Health Grant, which has been instrumental in fostering its evolution from concept to campus-wide implementation. This strategic financial support has allowed for the developing and integrating of specialized initiatives such as adaptive sports programs, which have become a hallmark of Berkeley's inclusive approach to health and wellbeing.

The initiative to seek out grant funding was coordinated by Dr. Marlon Maus, a physician whose dual roles in academia and clinical practice have provided him with a unique perspective on the health needs of students. Recognizing the potential impact of such a program, the EIM-OC team led the charge in acquiring the initial grant, thus laying down a robust framework for what has since become a multifaceted wellbeing movement across the campus.

But the story of funding goes beyond initial acquisition; it involves ongoing stewardship and administrative oversight, a role that Dr. Maus has championed with unwavering commitment. The meticulous management of the grant ensures the continuity and dynamic evolution of health programs that keep Berkeley at the forefront of student health and wellbeing.

This UC system Equity in Mental Health Funding Grant, therefore, has not been a static benefit but a catalyst for innovation, empowering the EIM program to broaden its reach and deepen its impact on students. Through this funding, UC Berkeley has implemented a wide array of health promotion activities tailored to the needs of a diverse and ever-changing student body. It has facilitated the creation of spaces and programs where students with various abilities can engage in physical activity, shattering the one-size-fits-all approach and embracing a philosophy that celebrates diversity in health and wellbeing.

The visionary grant funding received by UC Berkeley's EIM program has not only allowed for the expansion of the initiative but has led to tangible health and wellbeing changes across the campus. For example, a significant portion of the grant has been allocated to the development of numerous staffing positions that directly impact the student experience.

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Additionally, grant funds have enabled UC Berkeley's EIM program to significantly enhance its reach and individualized support services. Specifically, the funds have allowed hundreds of students each year to benefit from personalized wellness experiences, including EIM-OC Personal Training sessions, Health Coaching Consultations, and Student Fitness Consultations. These services—essential to the EIM's mission—help students to establish and maintain healthy lifestyles, providing them with the guidance needed to make informed decisions about their physical wellness. This investment in individualized support underscores the program's commitment to the personal health journeys of its diverse student population.

The leadership and foresight in managing the grant funding exemplify UC Berkeley's strategic approach to systems-based change, ensuring that resources are maximized and opportunities for student wellness are continuously created and improved. This has enhanced the quality of campus life and established a model for other institutions to follow, showcasing how financial investment—when paired with visionary leadership—can profoundly transform a community.

Spotlight on adaptivity and inclusion

Central to UC Berkeley's EIM initiative is its focus on adaptive recreation, which underscores the University's and RecWell's commitment to inclusivity. This aspect of the program strives to eliminate barriers to physical activity for students, irrespective of their physical abilities, and promotes activities designed to accommodate individual needs.



An anonymous student benefiting from the adaptive aspects of the program, shares their experience: “I’ve learned to appreciate my body and its capabilities. The adaptive program here doesn’t just accommodate my physical needs; it embraces them, making me feel included and capable of achieving my fitness goals.”

As the Inclusive Recreation Coordinator, Marvin Floyd II plays an important role within RecWell to foster this environment. Having studied recreational therapy, Marvin supports RecWell’s expansion of adaptive sports offerings, ensuring programs are accommodating, welcoming, and empowering for all students. As Inclusive Recreation Coordinator, Marvin collaborates with Dr. Maus and provides the one-unit GoalBall DeCal class, which RecWell has offered for over a decade. In addition to DeCal classes, RecWell offers monthly adaptive sports samplers, which include wheelchair basketball and adaptive climbing. These innovative programs are a testament to UC Berkeley’s commitment to inclusive education and the joy of movement for every student, regardless of their physical abilities.

One student’s journey exemplifies the many lives that Marvin and the EIM Committee have touched: “Marvin’s passion for inclusivity has transformed the way I see fitness and participation. The DeCal classes were a gateway to new experiences that were both challenging and rewarding. I never felt sidelined because of my limitations; instead, I was supported to push them.”

In these classes and the broader adaptive program, students are not defined by their disabilities but are celebrated for their capabilities. The programs foster a sense of achievement and belonging. One student attests to this by sharing, “The adaptive program doesn’t just adjust for my physical needs, it values them. I’ve not only become more active, but I’ve also become an advocate for inclusivity within fitness.”

RecWell’s Inclusive Recreation program is about changing perceptions, enhancing confidence, and creating a community where adaptability and inclusion are not just concepts but the foundations of a vibrant, active campus life. The program to date has had direct efforts supporting multiple student populations who may be at risk for current or future barriers; examples include:

DeCal classes: Integrating health into the heart of student learning

The DeCal courses at UC Berkeley, part of the Democratic Education at Cal (DeCal) program, provide a unique platform for student-facilitated learning. These courses enable students to lead their peers in subjects they are passionate about, which includes components of the Exercise is Medicine (EIM) initiative and Adaptive Recreation. EIM integrates with these student-run classes by offering courses that emphasize physical health, such as classes on nutrition, exercise science, or even specific workout types. They provide a student-oriented approach to wellbeing, combining academic insight with practical health applications. This innovative educational model contributes to a well-rounded campus experience, promoting physical activity as a vital part of student life and learning.

For more information on the DeCal program, you can visit the [UC Berkeley DeCal Program website](#).

- **Students with disabilities:** Through adaptive sports programs and personalized training, students with disabilities receive support tailored to their specific physical abilities.
- **Neurodiverse students:** Initiatives have been developed for students on the autism spectrum, offering programs that support their unique ways of engaging with physical activities.
- **Students with chronic conditions:** The program supports students who aim to manage their conditions through lifestyle changes rather than medication alone.
- **Students experiencing mental health challenges:** Focusing on the intersection of physical health and mental wellness, the program has offered support and services tailored to these students.
- **Culturally diverse populations:** The program acknowledges students' diverse cultural backgrounds and tailors its approach to ensure inclusivity and understanding of different health and wellness practices.

Cultivating a community of health: Stories of empowerment and inclusivity

The EIM program at UC Berkeley stands out as a beacon of transformation, celebrating diversity of experiences and fostering a culture of inclusivity. Karen Vo, a student who has reaped the program's benefits, shares her journey: "I felt supported and listened to on multiple fronts when it came to my health goals. Instead of only being given very general guidance, I was provided with personalized motivation and advice on how to incorporate physical activity and healthy foods in ways that I would genuinely enjoy."

The EIM program offered Karen an affordable path to manage her health condition, removing the financial barriers to essential services like personal training and nutrition counseling. Her motivation was sustained by the collaborative support from various health specialists at UC Berkeley who provided her with personalized advice to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle.

Her sentiment echoes the experiences of Lydia Vásquez Trucios, who found a welcoming environment in the program that catered to her background as part of a low-income, immigrant family. For Lydia, the program was a revelation, introducing her to a judgment-free space where she could explore health and wellness in ways she never had before and allowing her to overcome internalized self-doubt.



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Sue Noyes, Associate Director, Recreation and Wellbeing, highlights the EIM program's holistic philosophy: "We're not just focusing on physical activity; we're looking at how we can support our students' overall wellbeing. It's about creating an environment where they can thrive in every aspect of their lives." This reflects in the program's collaborative efforts, intentional systems-level considerations and the personalized outreach that both Karen and Lydia benefited from.

Lauren Magdaleno, MPH, CHES from University Health Services (UHS) further underscores the initiative: "Our goal is to provide students with the tools and resources they need to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. By integrating wellness initiatives into all aspects of campus life, we can create a culture of wellbeing that extends beyond the classroom." It's this integrative approach that helps students manage medical conditions through lifestyle changes, fostering an optimistic outlook on health without sole reliance on medication.

Together, Karen and Lydia's stories embody the essence of UC Berkeley's EIM initiative—a program that extends an empathetic hand to those unfamiliar with or feeling excluded from the world of health and fitness. It's a commitment to ensuring health is not a privilege but a shared value, championed by dedicated administrators on the EIM committee. Through their efforts, and the program's responsive and empathetic framework, UC Berkeley's EIM has successfully cultivated a community where each individual—regardless of background—feels empowered to prioritize wellbeing.

Leading by example: Pioneering strategies for systemic change

Karen's experience with the EIM program exemplifies UC Berkeley's systemic shift. Through their collaborative model, students like Karen are supported by an integrated network of healthcare and wellness professionals that provide them with a seamless journey from medical consultation to active lifestyle changes.

This proactive, systems-level approach is further evidenced by the collaborative efforts of UHS, RecWell, and the School of Public Health, crafting an EIM program that actively adapts to and celebrates diversity within the student body.

At UC Berkeley, EIM is not merely a program but a movement championed by student leaders who often describe a transformative experience under personalized mentorship. This sentiment is reinforced by Dr. Marlon Maus, who underscores the power of educational advocacy in shaping our world's future, informed, health-conscious leaders.

Expansion and continual improvement

UC Berkeley's commitment to wellness extends beyond the EIM program, with ongoing efforts to expand and refine their approach to holistic health. Mary Popylisen, who was involved in program development, highlights the university's dedication to continual improvement: "We're always looking for ways to enhance the student experience and address emerging health needs. Our work with EIM is just one aspect of our broader mission to promote wellbeing across campus."

Emmett Campbell, student EIM intern and Public Health major, echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and innovation in wellness programming: "The needs of our students are constantly evolving, and our programs need to evolve with them. By staying responsive to feedback and open to new ideas, we can ensure that our initiatives remain relevant and effective."

Lessons learned and best practices

The success of UC Berkeley's Exercise is Medicine program offers valuable insights into the effective management of campus health initiatives. Key lessons include:

- **Collaboration is crucial:** The synergy between various campus groups such as University Health Services, Recreation and Wellbeing, and the School of Public Health has been indispensable. By working together, these groups have maximized the program's reach and efficacy.
- **Adaptivity enhances accessibility:** Customizing programs to meet diverse needs ensures inclusivity and increases engagement. From adaptive sports programs to culturally sensitive health workshops, UC Berkeley has demonstrated the value of understanding and addressing the unique backgrounds of its students.
- **Student leadership is instrumental:** Empowering students by involving them in leadership roles has proven essential. Students contribute fresh ideas and perspectives, making the programs more relatable and effective. "Our student leaders are not just participants; they are pivotal drivers of change," emphasizes Lauren Magdaleno, one of the program's key administrators.
- **Explore alternative funding:** Securing diverse funding sources—including grants, donations, and university funds—has expanded specialized initiatives. This approach has facilitated innovations that might not have been possible through traditional funding alone.

UC Berkeley's approach is a promising practice for other institutions looking to enhance their health and wellbeing approaches. By embracing collaboration, adaptivity, and student leadership, and by exploring innovative funding solutions, other campuses can replicate this success.

"We encourage other universities to look at health holistically, integrating physical activity into the fabric of campus life not as an add-on, but as a fundamental aspect of student wellbeing," Sue Noyes, Associate Director, Recreation and Wellbeing advises. This model not only supports students' physical health but also contributes significantly to their academic success and personal growth, setting a standard for how higher education institutions can foster a thriving, health-conscious community.

A model for future initiatives

UC Berkeley's innovative approach to Exercise is Medicine® serves as a blueprint for other institutions aiming to integrate comprehensive wellbeing into their campus cultures. The initiative is not only pioneering in approach but also resonant with empirical evidence that underscores the benefits of exercise on health. With a growing body of participation, the initiative's effects may reflect the positive impact physical activity has on conditions like depression and pre-diabetes—as highlighted in studies by Plotnikoff (2019)—which emphasize the critical role of physical activity in maintaining health and preventing chronic diseases. This suggests that the program's activities are more than just a series of events; they are integral steps towards fostering a campus culture where wellbeing is pervasive.

The program's success is a compelling call to action, encouraging campuses worldwide to adopt a more holistic, inclusive approach to health and wellbeing. As Dr. Marlon Maus concludes, "What we've created here at UC Berkeley is more than a program—it's a movement. A movement towards a healthier, more inclusive future. And it's a journey that's just beginning." With a steadfast commitment to collaboration, adaptability, and student-centered programming, UC Berkeley is paving the way for a new era of wellbeing in higher education.

Take action and join the Promising Practices webinar

To learn more about UC Berkeley's Exercise is Medicine program and their integration of health into the fabric of campus life, join representatives from UC Berkeley at their upcoming webinar.

Get details at nirsa.org/promising.