

# REQUIREMENTS FOR A HEALTHIER “U”

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*Thinking Critically  
about Wellness in  
Higher Education*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this report is to determine how the concept of “Mind, Body, and Spirit,” as explained in Outcome 10 of the Liberal Education Program (LEP) Outcomes for 2013-2014, can be integrated as a theme for one section of a First-Year Seminar (FYS) course at Southwest Minnesota State University. Our hope is that this particular course can educate students to think critically about their individual wellness. Research findings from interviews, scholarly journals, and SMSU curriculum documents suggest that while the idea of wellness is being covered in some courses across the university curriculum, it could be more developed as an individual theme for first year students.

## **Introduction**

Making smart decisions regarding health and wellness during one's college years is a serious matter due to a substantial increase in levels of inactivity and poor eating habits. College classes are closely tied to a sedentary lifestyle (sitting in class for long periods of time for example) and often educate students toward a sedentary profession (Sparling 4). Providing a wellness course that allows students to critically evaluate their choices regarding their own personal health and wellness is essential to a campus's curriculum.

Of the many skills acquired during one's college education, critical thinking is of the utmost importance and will be crucial for each student's future outside the classroom. Colleges and universities throughout the United States provide students with the opportunity to choose courses that educate on a variety of themes associated with thinking critically, and SMSU is no exception. As part of the Liberal Education Program (LEP), SMSU requires first year, non-transfer students to complete a course entitled First-Year Seminar (FYS). Every FYS course has a different theme with the overall purpose to encourage critical thinking (Liberal Education Committee).

This report will focus on introducing a FYS course that educates students to think critically about wellness and develop the skills and tools necessary to make smart decisions concerning their own personal well-being.

This report includes three sections: (1) Research Plan, (2) Research Results, and (3) Recommendation.

## **Research Plan**

To study whether the concept of “Mind, Body, and Spirit” can be integrated as a theme for one section of a FYS course, we followed a three part research plan:

- Phase 1: Gather Initial Information
- Phase 2: Interview Personnel
- Phase 3: Analyze and Reevaluate Information

### ***Phase 1: Gather Initial Information***

Initially, we began with the idea of reinstating a health and wellness course as a requirement into the core curriculum. We began our research by gathering information from scholarly journal articles found through academic databases on the SMSU library website. The articles discussed wellness courses at other colleges and universities, the overall importance of physical activity, and the idea of healthy living post-college. Additional articles touched on the effects that providing health and physical education courses have on individual health, brought to light potential diseases caused by sedentary life, discussed obesity and poor eating habits, and noted the general lack of knowledge about personal health and wellness. We also looked into SMSU’s core curriculum to see if there was a way to add an additional course requirement that would focus on health and wellness. In doing so, we took a curriculum document from the SMSU website, which included information from the Liberal Education Committee (LEC) about the outcomes of the LEP.

### ***Phase 2: Interview Personnel***

Because this report relates directly to SMSU and the current curriculum, we decided it was vital to conduct on-campus interviews to gain insight from those knowledgeable about this subject.

We began by interviewing Daniel Kaiser, Mathematics Professor and Chair of the Curriculum Committee, and found out information regarding the previous decision to eliminate the required health and physical education credit course in the core curriculum. We also interviewed Dr. Beth Weatherby, Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, to gauge her reaction to the possibility of reinstating such a course requirement. From our discussion with Dr. Beth Weatherby, we decided that it was not feasible to add a course requirement, but instead to create a section of FYS geared toward critical thinking about health and wellness.

### ***Phase 3: Analyze and Reevaluate Information***

Based on the feedback that we received from our interviews, our group decided to reevaluate our topic. With a new plan in place, we found additional scholarly journals articles to support critical thinking about wellness in higher education. We also conducted an interview with Dr. Teresa Henning, our current professor, to gather information regarding Outcome 10 and its current impact within the university. In addition, we searched the SMSU website for information specifically related to FYS courses. We found an instructor's manual for FYS courses that provided an overview of course objectives, structure, theme, and description.

## **Discussion of Results**

We found that the results of our research could be separated into three categories. The first is connecting mind, body, and spirit, the second is how wellness promotes critical thinking, and the third is building a foundation for the future.

### ***Connecting Mind, Body, and Spirit***

“The ancient Greek “Naturalist” philosophers and educators recognized the importance that regular exercise had on stimulating the mind and producing a well-rounded student that would be strong in mind, body, and spirit”

–As stated by Gregory J. Soukup Sr., Assistant Professor of Kinesiology at University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, TX in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, & Dance*

We agree that the key to wellness is a combination of mind, body, and spirit. Mind can be explained as thinking critically, body by developing healthy habits, and spirit through engaging the learner (Henning). Physical activity, which can incorporate mind, body, and spirit, is a way to develop healthy habits and is a fundamental aspect for a prosperous life. People who are active and exercise on a regular basis tend to be less anxious, depressed, or non-social, tend to miss less class time, experience more positive moods, and are more likely to have better self-esteem (Le Masurier & Corbin 45-46). Furthermore, an active lifestyle can help individuals learn proper goal setting and understand the importance of self-assessment. Betty Block, Professor of Health and Human Performance at Texas A&M University, and William Russell, Professor of Health, Physical Education, & Recreation at Missouri Western State University, suggest that educating students to critically analyze their health choices will help them use more appropriate processes, intellectual and psychological, applied to their decision making (47). Therefore, we can conclude that providing physical activity opportunities to students can help develop the mind, strengthen the body, and improve the overall spirit of each student.

### ***Wellness Promotes Critical Thinking***

Most colleges promote lifelong learning by educating students on various disciplines. However, the concept of health and wellness throughout the various disciplines is often overlooked as a topic to think critically about. In many situations, students know more about this topic than they think they do. The shortcoming occurs when students don't know how to incorporate that knowledge into real life situations. By educating our students on critical thinking related to wellness, we can teach them to identify flaws in personal-health decisions, employ intellectual processes to make critical decisions, and actively pursue a positively sustaining lifestyle (Block & Russell 50). An article in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* suggests that fitness and wellness courses should be “laboratories for critical thinking” in that they provide a logical setting to give students an opportunity to apply intellectual thought processes to relevant health information (Block & Russell 51). Brad Cardinal, professor of exercise and sport science at Oregon State University believes that requiring just one or two courses can jump start a student into thinking about healthy lifestyle choices in college and later in life (News and Research Communications). These courses can help students develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors as previously mentioned in the idea of mind, body, and spirit necessary to “become independent consumers who are knowledgeable about their own health and well-being” (Kulinna et. al. 128).

### ***Building a Foundation for the Future***

The knowledge and skills these courses provide will help students make positive decisions that impact their wellness for many years to come. Provost Beth Weatherby emphasizes this further by saying, “If you are really looking, as we are, at fostering the growth of life-long learners we

have to take that ‘Mind, Body, and Spirit’ concept very seriously.” However, building a foundation for life-long learning isn’t always easy. With that said, now is the time to start constructing the foundation since “unhealthy behaviors in young adults, usually leads to unhealthy behaviors as adults” (Le Masurier & Corbin). Based on this, a health and wellness course provides a way for students to learn about both health and physical activity, two necessary components for sustaining one’s overall well-being.

## Recommendation

Figure 1: Outcome 10

Outcome 10: Integrate mind, body, and spirit, the essential elements of a flourishing life.

- Explore how mind, body, and spirit function in interconnected ways.
- Reflect on the intellectual, physical, and spiritual factors that shape personal and social identities.
- Understand their individual wellness from various disciplinary perspectives.
- Acquire knowledge to pursue their full human potential.

Source: SMSU website

This outcome states that after completion of the LEP, students will be able to integrate the elements of mind, body, and spirit. The outcome also suggests that information should be taught to help students acquire knowledge in order to pursue their full human potential. According to Dr. Teresa Henning, this outcome is currently being addressed through programs on campus—especially in Residence Life and the wide range of speakers, plays, activities, clubs, and other events available on campus.



Instead of through extra-curricular activities, we propose this outcome be integrated by offering a more structured option for students since “educators have the ability to positively affect health-related critical thinking skills” (Block & Russell 46). Therefore, we recommend that SMSU offer a course to first-year students that focuses on thinking critically about health and wellness, which will integrate the concept of “Mind, Body, and Spirit,” as explained in Outcome 10.

Since there are currently 12 professors from various departments teaching FYS courses, a professor from any department could teach this particular course as long as it incorporates his/her individual interest or expertise relating to health and wellness. An exercise science or physical education professor would be a logical choice for instruction, but isn’t necessary for students to learn and grasp health-related concepts. For example, a history professor with an interest in nutrition would be a possible candidate for this course.

The first core objective for FYS courses, as explained in the Instructor’s Manual, is an introduction to university education, and also the social and intellectual community of Southwest Minnesota State University. To meet this objective, we recommend the course introduce students to the various fitness facilities (gyms, weight room, fitness center, and pool) on campus in a way that is inviting for first year students. This would be important since these facilities are often intimidating for first year and low-fitness or low skill-level students (News and Research Communications). Introducing first year students to these facilities could also help prevent the dreaded ‘freshman 15,’ which often occurs when incoming freshman are not mature enough to eat correctly and find it difficult to make time to exercise (*JOPERD* 12)

The second core objective is an introduction to critical thinking which includes the ability to construct arguments, evaluate claims and evidence, and consider multiple points of view (LEC).

This objective could be met through in-class activities such as learning how to read nutrition labels, understanding the importance key of ingredients, vitamins, and minerals, and learning about current health or exercise trends.

The third core objective is an introduction to research skills and informational literacy, including use of our library's collection of books, periodicals, and online resources (LEC). This FYS course could meet this objective by requiring students to research sources for papers, presentations, or projects about a particular subject related to their personal health and well-being. For example, students could create a research project about how some aspect of health or wellness directly relates to their major or future profession. The SMSU McFarland library has resources readily available, such as the *Health Education Journal* and the *Journal of Physical Education*, which could both be useful sources.

The fourth and final objective for each FYS course is to achieve a greater understanding of the designated theme. Our recommended course theme would revolve around health and wellness and provide a comprehensive multi-disciplinary approach that ensures a greater understanding of one's mind, body, and spirit.

In summary, this report has looked at how providing a new section of a FYS course with a health and wellness theme would help students think critically about wellness, develop health habits, and promote life-long learning. According to Provost Beth Weatherby, "A great vision for a

University would be to really focus on health and well-being because everything is changing in that regard.” We agree with this vision and think that this FYS course would be a step in the right direction towards building a solid foundation for a healthier SMSU and its future students. With that said, we strongly encourage the consideration of this recommendation as well.

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